

Stop 352 Adult Tour – Bromeliads, Stove House

Few families in the plant kingdom can compete with the bromeliad's wide range of sizes, exotic shapes, colorful foliage, and brilliant long lasting flowers. One bromeliad that may not only *look* familiar to you, but *taste* familiar as well, is the pineapple. It's the only bromeliad that's grown as a food. Columbus discovered it being cultivated in the West Indies on his second trip to the New World in 1493. The sweet fruit was such a rare and exotic treat that the king of England posed with one in his official portrait.

Some species of bromeliads, like the pineapple, are terrestrial – they grow out of the ground. But many bromeliads are epiphytic – that means the plant grows on the branches and trunks of trees, using its' strong roots to cling to the bark for support. As Conservatory Manager Rob Nicholson points out, the garden has examples of both.

Rob: “If you look at the pineapple it's kind of a surprising leap to go to Spanish Moss, because those two plants look so different from each other. But Spanish Moss, the shaggy looking beard that's hanging near the door, is actually also a bromeliad, but that's an epiphytic bromeliad.”

Epiphytes use their leaves and their roots to absorb water and nutrients from the air rather than from the soil. Spanish Moss is one of the best-known bromeliads to grow north of the New World tropics. It's long shaggy foliage is unique, considering that the leaves of most bromeliads are usually arranged in an overlapping spiral pattern called a 'rosette.' Depending on the plant's size, this whorl of leaves may form a 'vase' that can hold from a few ounces to over 10 gallons of water! While the bromeliad gets many nutrients from the decomposing leaves and insects trapped in this *water reservoir*, it also serves as an important habitat for some tropical animals – many tree frogs spend their entire lives there!