

Growing Plants in Trees By Luis Llenza

Orchids, bromeliads and some ferns are epiphytic types of plants. Epiphytes grow with roots exposed to air and often on another plant. Epiphytes can grow on the trunks, branches or leaves of trees, and add that extra tropical look to your landscape.

The trees best suited for epiphytes include the Oak tree because of its coarse, hard bark. They will also grow on Citrus or Tabebuia trees as well as the mature, woody part of Palm trunks. When getting started, the "boots" of the Cabbage Palm are an excellent spot to place an orchid or fern.

Chances are that any orchid you buy at a plant shop is an epiphyte. You will have the most luck with Dendrobiums, often blooming several times a year, and with Oncidiums, Phalaenopsis and Cattleyas, usually blooming once a year. Cattleyas are often fragrant and their color range is incredible.

Epiphytes must be attached firmly to tree bark. They can be attached directly or to a cork and/or sphagnum moss mount. The root system should be tied with a biodegradable substance such as twine. If there are any stems, such as with some orchids, tie them also. The idea is to ensure the plant remains secure despite the weather. Usually within a year enough roots have grown to secure it into place.

Epiphytes should be tied high enough in the tree to be seen. For orchids I recommend tying them at least seven feet off the ground so that their beautiful flowers can be seen and so they won't be stolen. Dress up your entryway with flowers; try tying several orchids to a tree. Place the first orchid seven feet from the ground, the second six feet from the ground and the third five feet from the ground. Make sure either your sprinklers or your commitment are in place to mist twice a day, morning and sunset, especially the first 3 months.

Bromeliads and ferns deserve their own trees. For bromeliads, I like Aechmeas and the Neoregelia, especially fireball species and cultivars zebrina and albomarginata. They add color when placed from four to six feet off the ground, going up and around the tree. Ferns make a solitary statement. I use Stag's Horn Fern (*Platycerium Bifurcatum*) and the Maiden Hair Fern (*Adiantum pedatum*) and Blue Fern (*Polypodium*) usually mounting each at five feet off the ground.