

GENERAL

“*Tillandsia*, Wonders of Nature” (*Tillandsia*, le meraviglie della natura): An Italian exhibition event entirely dedicated to the genus.

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Figure 1. The exhibition staff in front of some of the display specimen plants. From left to right: Andrea Oldrini (Antares), Giancarlo Calini (Antares' President), Paolo Michieli and Roberta Filipini (Michieli Floricoltura), Gilberto Oldrini (Antares' Vice-president). Photo by Gabriella Belli.

Despite their beauty, elegance and charm, tillandsias (and bromeliads in general) still have a diminished popularity in Italy, compared to other botanical families, such as orchids, cacti, succulents and so on. Moreover, in Italy it is hard to find any associations that systematically deal with these plants² and promote the opportunity to admire and learn about them. Recently, tillandsias have begun re-appearing after some decades of substantial anonymity to most people. When I first started collecting and studying this genus about ten years ago, I only discovered them by chance, while visiting an exposition of other rare plants.

If we could reconstruct the ups-and-downs of their popularity in Italy, we would need to go back to the 1980's. In those years, tillandsias gained some interest, yet they were presented more as an elegant decor accessory to be placed in a room, rather than as living plants that could be grown for continued enjoyment. In addition, available

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² The only Italian entity I know of is a Facebook group. There are currently no official Bromeliad Societies where people can meet regularly “face to face” to discuss and learn about these plants.



Figure 2. A view of some of the display plants. Among them are; *Tillandsia stricta*, *T. bergeri*, *T. tricolor*, *T. tenuifolia* and *T. aeranthos*. Besides the living plants, a number of old paintings portraying tillandsias enriched the exhibition. Photo by Marco Moggi.

cultivation information was very poor, so ignorance of the correct care led to many unhappy experiences that caused people to lose interest in the plants. To illustrate this, I remember an episode that occurred in those years when I was a child. One day, my grandmother bought something astonishing for me: “a little bush without roots” attached to a piece of wood. How strange it seemed to me in comparison with a “real” plant! We could not imagine we had just seen our first tillandsia, but

we duly asked for more information from the gardener who sold it to us. He could not offer us anything more than saying “spray it once a week”. Within a short time, unfortunately, the plant died.

Since then, tillandsias almost disappeared in Italy, (at least for the non-enthusiast people like me), except for *Tillandsia* (now *Wallisia*) *cyanea*, whose fame was due to its adaptability of growing not only mounted, or as an epiphyte, but also living “traditionally” in a pot with soil. This perceived peculiarity made it widespread and easily found, even in supermarkets, but on the other hand it obscured its reputation and ability as a *Tillandsia*, or “air-plant”. Another exception is *Tillandsia aeranthos*. Even though this species is still less widespread than *Wallisia cyanea*, you can find it grown outdoors adorning gardens mainly in coastal regions like Liguria and other zones in the south of Italy, but not in areas like the one I live in, near Milan in the north of the country.



Figure 3. Many people visited the exhibition, keen to enjoy and learn. Photo by Marco Moggi.

Anyway, my interest in looking for tillandsias and growing them has progressively deepened. I have enjoyed showing and sharing with others their unique characteristics and natural beauty. In particular, I involved the association Antares³, (whose

Vice-president is my father, Gilberto), in the organization of an exhibition entirely dedicated to these plants, entitled “*Tillandsia, le meraviglie della natura (Tillandsia, Wonders of Nature)*”. This event, now in its second edition, took place in Legnano on March 3rd and 4th, 2018. It was developed in cooperation with Michieli Floricoltura, an Italian nursery highly specialized in this field.

Our exhibition offered people a number of different ways to approach and interact with tillandsias. Firstly, it represented an interesting opportunity to simply view and learn about many live plants, from the most common to the rarest species. We had over 600 visitors who admired their shapes, colors, flowers and charm and were surprised to learn the classified species of *Tillandsia* number in the many hundreds, with new species continuing to be recently discovered and described. They could also not believe that they belong to the same botanic family as the well-known pineapple - *Ananas comosus*!

We also received attendance and great appreciation by the authorities of our town, in particular by two City Council members, Mr. Colombo, dealing with policy instruction and culture, and Mr. Alpoggio, responsible for territory and environment. These gentlemen found the tillandsias unusual and almost “special”. They were particularly interested both in the way they live and survive in their habitats, and also in the use of tillandsias as pollution monitors.

Secondly, our event was also frequented by several *Tillandsia* enthusiasts, searching for uncommon specimens to enrich their collections. Our friend and expert, Paolo Michieli, brought many sale plants selected from his prestigious nursery, as well as some gorgeous specimens from his private collection for the display. These included a very old specimen of *Tillandsia xerographica* (see Figure 4.), a marvellous *Tillandsia vicentina*, some *Tillandsia hondurensis* and a number of more discrete *Tillandsia* species belonging to sub-genus *Diaphoranthema*. Among the many species displayed, *Tillandsia tectorum* was one of the most appreciated, thanks to its frosty appearance, mixed with a refined elegance. Personally, I was fascinated by a blooming *Tillandsia lepidosepala*,



Figure 4. Andrea Oldrini holding an extraordinary *Tillandsia xerographica* specimen in front of the 'Tillandsia WALL' display. Photo by Gabriella Belli.

³ Antares is an association of volunteers settled in Legnano (a city near Milan, Italy), that has been in operation since 1975 (www.antareslegnano.org). It is a non-profit organisation made up of people fond of natural science, whose aim is the diffusion of naturalistic knowledge in the three fields of astronomy, mycology and botany.

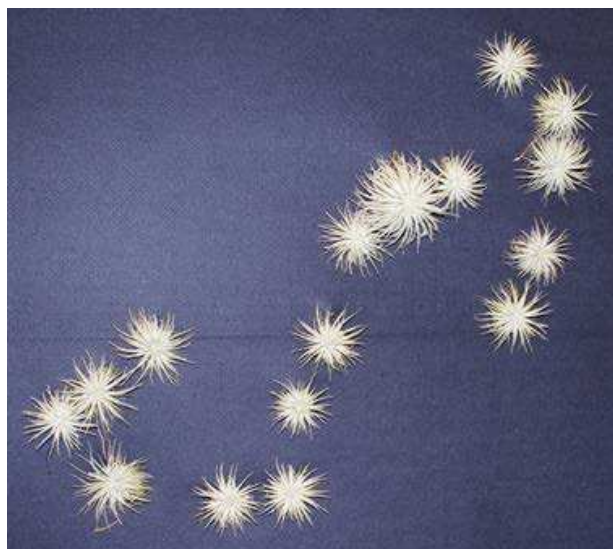


Figure 5. The first display on the 'Tillandsia WALL', made up of *Tillandsia tectorum* reproducing the Scorpius constellation. Photo by Marco Moggi.



Figure 7. The third 'Tillandsia WALL' display, with the letter "A" written with *Tillandsia stricta* and *Tillandsia aeranthos*. Photo by Marco Moggi.

especially because I had read a lot about its green flowers. I had never seen it blooming, other than in photos in books or on the internet.

The third point of view we offered, highlighted the artistic nature of tillandsias. This side of the exhibition was

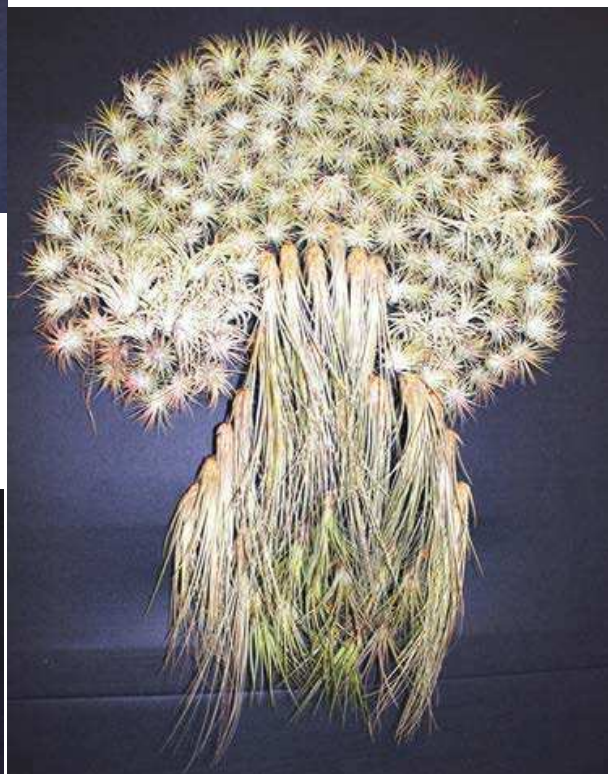


Figure 6. The second display on the 'Tillandsia WALL', with the mushroom *Boletus edulis*, realised with a combination of *Tillandsia ionantha*, *Tillandsia juncea* and *Tillandsia tricolor*. Photo by Marco Moggi.

well represented by Michieli's 'Tillandsia WALL', a display structure providing an innovative solution for vertical gardens, conceived for any kind of surface. To us, the 'Tillandsia WALL' can be defined as a meeting point between design and nature, living plants and innovation. In other words, a sort of translation of imagination into a living artistic creation that is also fully sustainable. Different from a composition of cut flowers that

will expire after some days, this representation is everlasting, showcasing the versatile nature of tillandsias with their epiphytic behavior and capability to our visitors. On this occasion, this artistic display was inspired by three pictures describing the Antares Association's field of interests; astronomy, mycology and botany. The first theme saw the reproduction of a singular Scorpius constellation (made up of *Tillandsia tectorum*), chosen because its main star (Antares) provides the name of our Association (see Fig. 5). The second theme was an extraordinary depiction of *Boletus edulis*, well known to all mushrooms seekers, created with a combination of *Tillandsia ionantha*, *Tillandsia juncea* and *Tillandsia tricolor* (see Fig. 6). The last theme portrayed the letter "A", which is the beginning both of the word *aeranthos* (one of the tillandsias used in the display) and of the name of Antares itself. In this case, the species used were *Tillandsia stricta* and *Tillandsia aeranthos* (see Fig. 7).

Finally, through this event we wanted to provide more exposure, knowledge and sensibility about tillandsias in our region. We also organised a number of short workshops designed for anyone desiring to learn about and hopefully fall in love with this amazing group of plants. During the exhibition, expert grower, Paolo Michieli, author of the only Italian book entirely dedicated to these plants, explained how they live in nature, described their habitats and also showed how to properly care for them and how to start a collection.

Personally, I was very satisfied with the appreciation shown by the public and our members. A video and photo expose of the event can be found on our website [www. antareslegnano.org](http://www.antareslegnano.org) . I am already working on organising the Tillandsia Exhibition edition again for 2019. I hope this article will contribute to promote further interest, enthusiasm and the cultivation and the study of tillandsias in Italy, and in our wider region. Furthermore, I can say that Antares is joining the Bromeliad Society International and I would be delighted to make contact with other tillandsia groups (and general bromeliad societies) in Europe and around the world, to share experiences, ideas and possibly develop common projects.

BSI News

BSI has lost several important supporters over the past few months. An alphabetical listing is below. This space is too small to include details, but you can expect more information to follow in future issues of the Journal.

Don Beadle - Inducted as a BSI Honorary Trustee earlier this year.

Chet Blackburn - Former Editor of the Journal of the Bromeliad Society.

Renate Ehlers - *Tillandsia* expert from Germany, known for *Tillandsia ehlersiana*.

Maureen Frazel - Instructor in Eastern region BSI Judging Schools

David Higgs - One of the International Directors for BSI.

Kay Klugh - half of our dedicated Treasurer team.