

SPREADING AIR-PLANT

Tillandsia utriculata L.

Synonyms: none

Family: Bromeliaceae (pineapple)

FNAI Ranks: G5/S3

Legal Status: US-none FL-Endangered

Wetland Status: US-none+ FL-none



Epiphytic on American elm (*Ulmus americana*); large leaves with expanded leaf base and not twisted; flowers born on elongated stem. Photo taken at Salt Lake WMA by Kelly Anderson.

Field Description: Large epiphytes with sizable rosettes of long, triangular leaves. The inflorescence of flowering plants may reach or exceed 1m in height. The floral bracts are erect and widely spaced, green or tinged purple and the individual flowers are white. Like other *Tillandsia*, the poorly developed roots of this epiphyte help secure individuals to a variety of hosts.

Similar Species: This is the largest of the *Tillandsia* sp. in Florida. It is distinguished from large specimens of common wild-pine (*T. fasciculata*) and its associated varieties by its broader leaf bases and its taller, green flowering stalks.

Related Rare Species: Most similar to *T. fasciculata* in size, but may be confused with *T. variabilis* when young.

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Habitat: Bright, exposed areas in swamps, hammocks, mesic flatwoods, and occasionally on the periphery of basin marshes and in improved pastures. Found on live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*) and other trees. Trees with thick-ridged bark allow for easier attachment and seedling recruitment.

Best Survey Season: Summer-fall.

Range-wide Distribution: West Indies, Central and South America. In Florida, found from Putnam County south.

Conservation Status: Occurs with regularity throughout much of the FL peninsula. The most serious threats to this species are the Mexican bromeliad weevil and conversion of its habitat to urban, suburban, or agricultural uses.

Protection and Management: Spreading air-plants may live for as many as 20 years, however, this is a monocarpic species. After flowering, the plant releases its seed and then dies. This is the largest *Tillandsia* species and the largest bromeliad in Florida. Its historic range extended across much of the central and southern peninsula. Since its introduction in 1989, the Mexican bromeliad weevil (*Metamasius callizona*) has killed many plants by burrowing into, and destroying, the leafy, tank-like rosettes. The Florida populations of spreading air-plant are particularly susceptible to damage from this weevil. Florida now lists this and most other rosette-forming bromeliads as threatened or endangered. Since most *Tillandsia* species are slow to mature, protecting the trees in primary habitats will encourage the development of healthy epiphyte populations. Research has been conducted for possible biological control agents, and a test release of a parasitic fly was performed in 2007.

References: Weakley et al. 2023, Wunderlin and Hansen 2011



Epiphytic on live oak (*Quercus virginiana*). Photo taken at Bull Frog Creek WMA by Kelly Anderson.



Cardinal airplant (*Tillandsia fasciculata*) on the left with Giant wild-pine (*Tillandsia utriculata*) on the right. Photo taken at Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest by Kelly Anderson.

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Growing in mesic hammock; epiphytic on live oak (*Quercus virginiana*). Large leaves with expanded leaf base and not twisted; flowers born on elongated stem. Photo taken at Salt Lake WMA by Kelly Anderson.