



Cryptanthus fosterianus 'Lisa Vinzant'



How to grow Cryptanthus

the dazzling Earth Stars



The rare species *Cryptanthus whitmanii*, named after Bob Whitman, a founder of the Cryptanthus Society.

POTTING

Cryptanthus in their natural habitat are true terrestrials (growing in the ground) and a few are saxicolous (growing among rocks). They have never been observed as epiphytes (living in trees) and should not be mounted.

Cryptanthus should not be under-potted. They develop root systems at least equal to the size of the plant — a five or six inch plastic pot is recommended to help conserve the needed moisture. The medium should be a loose, porous mixture similar to African Violet mix.. This should never be allowed to totally dry out. There are many good mixes; commercial potting soil, African Violet mix, soilless mixes, or a mixture of peat and sand with perlite. Regardless of the mix, it must be kept damp for best growth. Cryptanthus do well on capillary matting, wick watering, misting system or the old-fashioned method of watching the plant and giving it a drink when it needs it.

FERTILIZING

Although it is not necessary to fertilize your Cryptanthus to have the dazzling display of color and exquisite markings, you must fertilize to obtain maximum growth.

Cryptanthus are not finicky about fertilizer. However, use dilute solutions, even to a quarter of the recommended strength. There are many excellent brands on the market — any even balanced fertilizer works well (14-14-14, 10-10-10, etc.)

Many African Violet growers use AV fertilizers on their Cryptanthus and the results are outstanding. A time-released granular fertilizer combined into the potting mix for newly planted offsets show excellent results. Many Cryptanthus fanciers fertilize with each watering, using an extremely dilute solution. Orchid fertilizer is excellent. Organic fertilizers are also good. The point is, Cryptanthus, like us, like to eat. The amount of fertilizer really depends on the intensity of light in which the plants are grown. (Light + CO₂ + H₂O + Groceries = a healthy, happy plant.)



There are many cryptanthus cultivars and species that have unusual shapes and conformation such as this *Cryptanthus* 'Ingeborg Whitman'

high shade, in a window garden) or artificially such as on the plant carts that many indoor growers use. Some growers line their walls with reflective material to provide additional light. In fact, The colors intensify under fluorescent light. This makes the *Cryptanthus* an excellent office plant.

LIGHT

There are *Cryptanthus* which will grow in every light condition you may have. *C. beuckeri* is a low-light plant and many of its progeny like to be shaded, moist and humid. This makes *C. beuckeri* and its hybrids ideal plants for terrariums. Species such as *C. bahianus*, 'Cascade' and *warasii* can take full sun, but you will find the plants happier in diffused light.

For maximum color in most *Cryptanthus*, bright diffused light is necessary. Too much light will cause bleached spots on the foliage or a leathery, stressed look to the plant. In extreme cases, sunburn spots or holes will occur. On the other extreme, weak foliage and greening of color suggests that the plant needs more light. Acclimate your plants to grow in as much light as possible. Your light may come naturally (in the greenhouse, outside with



Cryptanthus come in a myriad of colors and patterns such as *C.* 'Raspberry Ice' and 'Honeysuckle Rose' pictured here.

TEMPERATURE

Cryptanthus are comfortable in temperatures the same as you, as are other bromeliads. 60 to 85 degrees brings out the best growing conditions. Most *Cryptanthus* can survive just above freezing, and some survive winter outside with a heavy mulch if water is cut back in the fall and the plants are allowed to "harden off": Depending on how long it stays below freezing, even in the twenties, severe leaf damage results but the mulch protects the root zone and Spring brings abundant, beautiful offsets. On the other extreme, they can take temperatures above one hundred as long as there is adequate humidity and the mix is not allowed to dry out. *Cryptanthus* are easy to grow outside in temperate regions and make exotic bedding plants. They grow just as well or better in the controlled environment of any indoor grower.

HUMIDITY

Many *Cryptanthus* enjoy humid conditions which may be increased inside the home or office by humidifiers, misting frequently, setting the pots over water or grouping together. Capillary matting does a great deal to increase humidity and maintain moisture. *Cryptanthus* grow wonderfully as accent pieces in a well lighted bathroom or above the kitchen sink where the humidity is generally greater.

INSECTS & DISEASE

Bromeliads in general are relatively pest free. Should you encounter scale, wear gloves and dip the plant in any

recommended non-copper containing insecticide (following manufacturer's instructions for mixing). Shade the plant at least four to 24 hours. Then rinse the plant but do not place it in bright light until the leaves dry. It is always wise to follow good horticultural cleanliness practices. Do not allow your plants to come in contact with galvanized metal, penta or copper.



Many cryptanthus produce offsets at the ends of long stolons. This makes for ideal hanging basket plants. The species seen here is *Cryptanthus* 'Road to Buzios'

BLOOMING

As with most bromeliads, the parent plant blooms only once in its lifetime. *Cryptanthus* are reliable bloomers. Different species and cultivars bloom at different times of the year and it is possible to have a collection blooming year-round. Although the name *Cryptanthus* means hidden flower, you are rewarded at maturity with a bouquet of delicate flowers. Depending on the species or cultivar, flowers may bloom one flower after another, or a cluster may open at the same time. Some varieties flatten and some bloom high on a scape.

Flowers are generally white; but certain clones of *C. bromelioides* has pinkish flowers, and efforts are underway to introduce fragrance, and pink to lavender flowers to modern cultivars from newer discovered species in Brazil. There is no need to force-bloom your *Cryptanthus* — they know their duty. The slowest to mature is the somewhat rare *C warasii*.

OFFSETS OR PUPS

Your *Cryptanthus* will produce offsets with new plants coming from the leaf axis, from woody stolons (as with *C. bahianus*) or from the base of the plant. This may begin before or immediately after blooming. The

ideal hanging basket plant, *Cryptanthus* 'Cascade' produces long, hanging stolons of up to 2 feet with rosettes at the end.

Offsets may be left on the mother plant for multiple growth or may be removed when ready (approximately one-third the size of the mother) with a slight twist and tug. The pup will release easily when it is ready. Some plants release their own offsets when they are sufficiently mature. Don't be alarmed that there are no roots on the pup. In nature the pup will roll to a new location or will take root in the decaying humus of the mother plant thus forming clumps or mats.

Your plant will root easily in your potting medium. Make a small depression, insert the short stem and press the mixture firmly around it. Pot no deeper than the base of the first leaf. Stake the plant if necessary to keep it from rocking back and forth. It is essential the plant feel secure for an extra fast start and good growth. Bottom heat may speed root development in colder climates. Place the plant in good growing conditions and water as you would a mature plant.



With all the varieties of cryptanthus species and hybrids available today (over 1200), a collector would be hard pressed not to find something to their liking. *Cryptanthus microglazioui* is a branching plant with small feathery leaves that grow along a red stem. *Cryptanthus warasii* resembles more a dyckia in form and color.