

Digging Deep - Gardening with Cynthia Brian

Paradise Found

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A traveler's tree looks like a banana tree but is really a bird of paradise

Traveler's Tree

I bet this specimen stumps you! *Ravenala madagascariensis* was named because its long leaf sheaths accumulate a quart of water, often used for drinking in emergencies by travelers. This Madagascar native has a trunk that resembles a palm and fronds that look like banana leaves, yet it is a member of the bird of paradise family boasting white flowers. In the tropics, the traveler's tree will grow to 30 feet, but in my three large ceramic deck pots, it reaches a perfect height of about eight feet, dying back in a winter freeze.

Bromeliads

What is not to love about these perennial monocotyledons? In tropical settings, we see them attached to trees, structures, or growing like pineapples. In California, they are usually used as houseplants requiring minimal maintenance. They thrive outdoors in the heat as long as the weather remains above freezing. Their brilliant bracts maintain color for six months or more and each rosette blooms only once. As the mother is dying, pups are born, repeating the cycle. Fill the cup



Pineapples are bromeliads. Bromeliads are easy and beautiful.

on the top of your bromeliad with water when necessary without watering the soil.

Anthuriums

Originally from Central and South American tropical rain forests, now a mainstay in the Hawaiian Islands, anthuriums flourish with heat, humidity, filtered light and good drainage. Colors include red, pink, white, orange and green. Combine them with other tropicals for a rich tapestry of vacation envy.

Jungle Fowl

In the islands, jungle fowl roam freely. The magnificently feathered roosters are protective of their girls and offspring. Chickens are the domesticated version of these jungle birds. Although the boys may not be welcome in your neighborhood, the hens will deliver fresh eggs while fertilizing and tilling your landscape. Peacocks are another beautiful bird in paradise. I grew up raising chickens and peacocks. While my egg business paved the way to my college education, the peacocks provided endless entertainment with their constant preening around anyone or anything they perceived to be female, including our ornamental cement ducks.

Koi Pond

Experience the luxury of getting up close and personal with friendly, curious, colorful fish by installing a koi pond, probably the most popular of all garden installations. With proper filtering, aerating and feeding, you will enjoy years of exotic water entertainment.



For water enjoyment, entertain a koi pond.

These are just a few ways to bring a slice of foreign fun to your home. There are hundreds of dramatic plants to introduce into your tropical design including begonias, orchids, amaryllis, bamboo, lilies, bougainvillea, mandevillas and vines of every sort. Keep in mind that many of the indoor plants we purchase at our favorite nursery or garden center are actually grown in the wild in tropical climates. Even if you don't decide to create a tropical paradise outside, you can always transport the tropics indoors to enjoy a bit of paradise. Finally, don't forget the importance of a water feature and attracting the birds.

Spring has sprung so why not bring the romance, adventure and luxury of a vacation hideaway to your piece of heaven. Kick off your mud boots, grab your flip flops and sun tan lotion, tuck a bright pink hibiscus blossom in your hair and find paradise in your continental backyard.