Question: Late this summer I purchased some bromeliad plants from a local garden center before I heard they are adding to the Zika virus problem. They have been growing outside, but with the cooler temperatures arriving, I need to bring them inside. Is there anything special I should do to them? R. P.

Bromeliads are tropical plants hardy to zone 9. They have been quite newsworthy lately. In the fight against the Zika virus, some cities in Florida have ordered the removal of these popular plants from area landscapes. The tight, cylindrical growth habit of the foliage holds water, and this standing water could possibly become breeding grounds for mosquitoes. Despite following the recommended protocol of flushing the water from the plants, removing discolored leaves, and applying non-chemical products to control the mosquito larvae, officials removed three dump truckloads of bromeliads from the Miami Beach Botanical Garden. Nurseries specializing in growing bromeliads have taken been swatted by broken contracts and poor sales.

In cooler climates where bromeliads cannot be overwintered outdoors, their popularity is increasing. Due to their ability to act as air filters, they are gaining indoor growing space in homes as well as commercial buildings. These tropical beauties have the ability to absorb VOCS, volatile organic compounds, which are toxins emitted by certain solids and liquids, such as cleaning products, fuels, paints and varnishes. A group of researchers from State University of New York performed a study to determine the ability of certain plants to remove VOCS from their surroundings. Results showed bromeliad plants were very good at removing six out of eight VOCs used in the study.

Before bringing your bromeliads inside, check the plant, soil, and pot for insects. If possible, remove the entire root system (soil and all) from the pot and inspect. Water the root ball well to encourage any unwanted pests to exit the soil mass. On the foliage, look for any evidence of insects, and spray with an insecticidal soap product labeled for use on bromeliads. It may be beneficial to repot the plant into a larger container using a well-drained potting mix if the plant is root bound. Not all mature bromeliads will rebloom, but they can be propagated to produce new plants that should eventually bloom given proper conditions.

Place the bromeliad indoors in an area where it will receive ample sunlight and humidity. Try to create an environment that mimics the tropics, if that is at all possible in the low light level, dry air winter homes of Wisconsin.

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