

Tillandsia recurvata

Tillandsia recurvata is the most widespread bromeliad. It occurs in the southern US, where it stretches from Florida all the way to Arizona, and as far south as Argentina and Chile. It grows epiphytically on trees, bushes, and cacti or as a petrophyte on rocky cliffs. It is even known to grow on roofs and power lines.

T. recurvata is the type species of subgenus *Diaphoranthema*, which contains some 30 variable and mostly miniature species that have small, inconspicuous flowers. Members of *Diaphoranthema* are common and locally abundant in South America, with a distribution centered in Argentina and Bolivia. Only two species reach North America:

T. recurvata (aka Small Ballmoss) was found growing close to the ground on the side of the barrel cactus *Echinocactus platyacanthus* near La Ascención, Nuevo León, Mexico (right). More often, *T. recurvata* is spotted (right) clinging to the bark of pine trees (*Pinus johannis* and *Pinus arizonica* var *stormiae*), as seen here at a spot between Santa Lucia and El Pinito, Nuevo León.



T. recurvata, sometimes called Small Ballmoss, and *T. usneoides*, the well known Spanish Moss.

Polyploidy, the condition wherein a plant contains more than one set of chromosomes in its cells, is common in this subgenus. Normally we think of polyploidy resulting in larger-than-normal plants, but these bromeliads tend to be quite small. A high degree of specialization (toward aridity, for instance) has led to a reduction in the size of their bodies and flowers, reduced branching in their inflorescences, and a reduction in the number of flowers per spike. Many produce only a single flower. Adding to the intrigue, several *Diaphoranthema* species are autogamous (they routinely pollinate themselves) or cleistogamous (wherein self-pollination occurs without the flower having ever opened).

Although *Diaphoranthema* species lack showy flowers, they are valued by collectors for their miniature and often bizarre habit, looking more like a moss or lichen than a bromeliad. *T. recurvata* is a short-stemmed species, slightly branched and often growing in thick tufts. Variable and widely distributed, it can easily be confused with other

Tillandsia species, such as *T. capillaris*, *T. crocata*, and *T. mallemonii*, which are found in similar habitats but which have different flower characteristics.

T. recurvata was described by Carl Linnaeus as *Renalmia recurvata* in 1753, the same year that he erected the genus *Tillandsia*. Nine years passed before he transferred *R. recurvata* to its present genus. Beer, in 1857, created the combination *Diaphoranthema recurvata* when he erected the genus *Diaphoranthema* to accommodate the tiny xeric tillandsias. Evidently the name didn't stick. It's also been dubbed *Tillandsia* (or *Diaphoranthema*) *uniflora*, a name that means "having a single flower."

I have seen this species on trips to South America and Florida and recently encountered it in northern Mexico, where the accompanying pictures were taken. In cultivation *T. recurvata* is a slow grower. It can be mounted on wood in a sunny spot with good air circulation. That makes it a good cactus companion both in home-grown collections and in the wild. 🌱