

Growing Catopsis

by Rob Reilly

“...The genus *Catopsis* is not well represented in Australia...” This statement was made in the March-April 1977 edition of *Bromeletter*, and is still true today. This is a pity, as the plants, while not particularly striking, possess a quiet charm and simple elegance.

The genus was described in 1864, and the word “*catopsis*” is derived from the Greek word meaning view. It probably refers to the fact that, in their natural habitat, they are usually found growing on trees. (However, they also sometimes grow on rocks).

They are usually found growing with *tillandsias* and *vrieseas* in Florida, Mexico, the Greater Antilles, the West Indies, Trinidad, Central America, and northern South America. There are 18 species and no registered hybrids.

Andreas (2005) aptly summarises a number of the plants’ attributes:

“...The leaves are soft, spineless, and often described as waxy with “chalky” scurfing (the powdery substance often visible on bromeliad leaves). The flowers are white or yellow, the inflorescences are simple or branched, erect or pendant. The seed capsules of some *catopsis* turn yellow or orange, and stay in colour for some time...”

Some *catopsis* species are dioecious. This means the male and female “elements” of a “normal” flower are on separate plants. Thus, a given plant will have either the pollen-bearing elements, or those resulting in seed production, but not both. Some species, for example, *C. morreniana*, are usually dioecious, but have some instances of “perfect” (that is, flowers with both male and female elements) flowering plants. The reverse arrangement also exists, for example, with *C. berterianana*. In other cases, for example *C. nutans*, whole populations (groups of plants in a specific location) are either entirely dioecious or perfect-flowered.

In their natural habitat, *catopsis* generally grow in dense shade, or, more rarely, in filtered light. I find they grow well under medium density (70%) shade cloth.

They like high humidity, and respond well to being watered three times a week in summer and once or twice a week in winter. (As the plants are often grown in small pots—see below—and have very thin leaves that do not store much water, it is important to pay attention to watering, as they can dry out quite quickly).

The plants can be grown in pots or on mounts similar to those used for most grey-leaved *tillandsias*. Under my growing conditions, I find they grow best in 110 to 140 mm pots, as they are less demanding in terms of their watering requirements. This arises as the potting mixture retains moisture between waterings.

The following potting mixtures have been used successfully:

- Well composted pine bark to which a continuous release, over a period of nine months or more, fertiliser such as Nutricote or Osmocote is added when the plants are potted.

- Small pine bark chunks (such as those used to grow cymbidium orchids in) treated with a special type of fertiliser available from the Society. Combine 1 part charcoal with 6 parts treated bark to form this potting mixture.
- A mixture of 1 part peatmoss or Cocopeat combined with 1 part coarse sand. Add Nutricote or Osmocote to this mixture when the plants are potted.

They appreciate receiving, on a weekly or fortnightly basis, a weak (one quarter to one half the recommended strength for indoor plants) foliar fertiliser such as Phostrogen.

Grasshoppers are usually the biggest pest problem, as they can make a “meal” of the plants’ leaves. An effective way of killing grasshoppers, is to catch them early in the morning when they are sluggish and squash them!

Six species are described in this article. They can be bought from some of the Society’s tillandsia specialists, and occasionally, at its Autumn or Spring shows.

C. beteroniana About 15 glaucous, yellow-green leaves form an upright, vase-like , rosette. The leaves are 30 to 40 cm long, and have a “chalky” appearance at their base. The erect, branching, inflorescence can reach a height of 90 cm, and has small, fragrant flowers with white petals.

Some people have speculated that this plant is carnivorous, in that insects are attracted into the plant’s centre and then cannot escape. They die, with their nutrients being absorbed by the plant as they decompose. Benzing (2000) in his major work, Bromeliaceae: Profile of an Adaptive Radiation, is unconvinced by this argument, but concedes it may be accurate. (The case is much stronger for two other bromeliads, namely, *Brochinia reducta* and *hectioides*).

C. compacta Around 20 leaves form an urn-shaped rosette about 40 cm high. The green leaves’ surfaces are heavily covered in a silvery “scurf”. The erect, multi-branched inflorescence rises well above the plant’s leaves. The flowers have white petals.

This is my personal favourite amongst the catopsis.

C. floribunda Over 20 leaves form a semi-erect rosette about 25 cm high. On mature plants, the shiny green leaves are light brown at their base. The multi-branched, semi-pendant, inflorescence has flowers with white petals.

C. nutans About 10 leaves form a semi-erect rosette approximately 20 cm high. The green leaves have a light silvery scurfing on both surfaces, although this is more pronounced towards their base. The flowers on the multi-branched inflorescence have bright yellow petals.

C. sessiflora Around 10 leaves form an erect rosette about 15 cm high. The light green leaves are covered with silvery scurf. The inflorescence is either simple or multi-branched. Its flowers have white petals.

This plant readily forms a clump.

C. subulata About 10 leaves form a bottle-shaped rosette, approximately 20 cm high. The green leaves have light grey scurfing on both surfaces. The multi-branched inflorescence rises well above the plant's leaves. The flowers have white petals.

These plants can be readily propagated from either offsets (pups) or seed.

Pups can be removed when they are a third to a half of the parent plant's size, during the period October to March. Pot them in the same mixture that you use for mature plants. They will normally flower within 12 months.

Catopsis can be grown from seed in a similar manner to that used for grey-leafed tillandsias. However, this is a slow process. For example, the three centimetres high *C. floribunda* seedlings in the photograph on p.41 are four years old! So, I would only recommend this method if you wanted many plants or were unable to obtain a plant or pup of that particular species. (Seed is often available from the seed banks run by the Bromeliad Society International or the Bromeliad Society of Australia).

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References

Andreas, K. (2005) *Catopsis*: A Quiet Bromeliad in *Orlandiana*, November 2005, v. 31 (11) pp 4-5.

Benzing, D. (2000) *Bromeliaceae: Profile of an Adaptive Radiation* Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.

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