

PLANT LIFE COLUMN

BOUGAINVILLEAS

Have you been searching for that perfect plant for your favorite flowerpot or trellis, as a small flowering tree, or as a neatly clipped hedge? The bougainvillea, or paper flower, may be the one for you.

Bougainvillea (boo-gen-VILL-ea), a native of South America, is a vigorous woody, vine that when pruned properly can form a shapely shrub. If not pruned, the vine may reach up to 20 feet! This is a great plant for a trellis or fence, or to climb up the side of your house. It can also be found in a dwarf variety, reaching a maximum of 2 feet, which is more suitable for a container or as a specimen plant. However bougainvillea is easily pruned to any size and shape you desire.

The leaves of the bougainvillea are of a rich green color with thorns at their base, Its flowers are actually three bright-colored papery bracts that surround small, inconspicuous white flowers. The bracts come in exotic shades of purple, pink, red, white, orange and yellow. The bougainvillea blooms heavily during the winter and spring, but may have continuous blooms throughout the year. This will depend on the species of bougainvillea you choose and how you take care of it. After a blooming cycle is over, the bracts will fall off and the plant will grow vegetatively, sending out new leaves and stems. It will then produce flowers on that new growth.

Full to partial sun is required for the bougainvillea's flower development. It thrives best in a well-drained, fertile soil. Do not let the soil get too wet. The bougainvillea likes to dry out between waterings, but not so dry that it begins to wilt or shed its leaves. This means the plant probably will not be too happy if it is placed where it is consistently hit by your sprinklers.

A 20-20-20 slow-release fertilizer can be used to provide the plant with a continuous nutrient supply, or you can use a typical soluble houseplant fertilizer three or four times a year. If you want to use a soluble fertilizer, use it every two weeks from spring to fall and only once every four to six weeks during the winter. A regular fertilizing schedule is important in order to keep the plant green and healthy.

The vegetative growth period of the bougainvillea (after the blooms are spent) is the time when you want to prune the plant. This should be done only if you wish to create a more compact and shapely specimen or if the plant is getting too large. The new growth tips should be cut right above the base of the leaf. This will promote the plant to produce new shoots in the direction of the angle you pruned, creating a bushier growth habit. Continue to prune the bougainvillea until you achieve the shape you want. However, the heavier the pruning, the fewer flowers that will be produced in the next bloom cycle. Just remember when you prune to watch out for those sharp thorns!

The bougainvillea is relatively free of any serious insects or diseases. The most common type of insect that attacks the plant is the bougainvillea caterpillar (*Asciodes gordialis*). This small green caterpillar feeds on the leaves of the plant and sometimes the flowers. It is not a serious pest. If you find them on your plant, you can either use a pesticide that is labeled for the plant and the pest or wait the cycle out. Leaves may be lost and your plant may start to look a little naked, but it will produce new leaves soon enough.

Bougainvilleas are tolerant of cold weather, but if frozen, will drop their leaves. They will come back by rejuvenating from the ground. The dead wood should be pruned from the plant in late winter or early spring, after the last freeze. You can prevent the plant freezing back by putting an old sheet or blanket over it or bringing it inside if it is in a pot. This way you will be able to keep it the size and shape you have worked so hard to create. It's not fun losing that big healthy plant and having to start over from scratch.

The bougainvillea is a very popular, magnificent plant in Central Florida. It has a wide variety of uses and puts on a beautiful show when in bloom. So, the next time you are wondering what type of plant to use in

your landscape, remember the bougainvillea. If you have any questions about the bougainvillea, please contact the Osceola County Extension Service at (321) 697-3000.

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