One of my favorite fall blooming plants is the bougainvillea. Diving around this past week, I saw a lot of purple, pink, and orange blooms everywhere; some growing high over a fence, some growing low along the ground. Bougainvillea, also called the paper flower, is a versatile plant that can be used in a flowerpot, on a trellis, as a small flowering tree, or as a neatly clipped hedge.

Bougainvillea (boo-gen-VILL-ea), a native of South America, is a vigorous woody, vine that when pruned properly can form a shapely shrub. There are two species that are commonly used in Florida. Bougainvillea spectabilis is a large sprawling shrub or vine which can grow as high or wide as 20 feet. Bougainvillea glabra has slightly smaller leaves and reaches a maximum height of ten feet with equal spread. However, no matter what the maximum size is, bougainvillea can be 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. However, the frequency of its blooms 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. The plant will bloom on this 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. Fertilize with a landscape fertilizer according to the package directions. Don’t spend too much time caring for bougainvilleas. They like to be ignored and seem to dislike too much TLC.

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 fuller 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. They will get you.

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, the easiest thing to do is just remove them by hand and put them in a bucket of soapy water or you can just leave them alone until their lifecycle is over. 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 not freezes. If damaged by freezing temperatures, they will drop their leaves. Some branches may even die. Any 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 and beautiful plant in Central Florida. It has a wide variety of uses and puts on a beautiful show when in bloom. If you have any questions about the bougainvillea or other landscaping questions please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at 321-697-3000 or email me at jwel2@osceola.org.

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