

Blooming Bougainvilleas

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Bougainvillea is one of the showiest plants for our long, hot East Texas summers. It is an easy growing tropical plant with lots of color that does very well in hanging baskets and pots. Bougainvillea can be pruned to be bushy or to grow on a trellis. In tropical areas Bougainvilleas will grow 20 to 30 feet tall when planted in the ground.

Bougainvilleas are popularly known as paper flowers and have no fragrance. These shrubby vines are commonly seen in bright pinks and lavenders. Named in honor of Admiral Louis de Bougainville, a French navigator, the vine was discovered in Brazil when Bougainville sailed to South America in 1768. Most of our commercial varieties are hybrids of *Bougainvillea spectabilis* (*B. Braziliensis*) and *B. glabra*. Newer hybrids appear regularly and we now even have grafted varieties in bi-colors.

The flowers that we associate with Bougainvillea are actually colorful bracts of red, purple, pink, lavender, orange, white and bi-colors. The true flowers are small, white and tubular and appear inside these bracts. Bougainvillea is normally thorny but new hybridizing efforts have produced some thornless and some with compact habits for container growing. They also come in a variety with variegated leaves.

Bougainvillea is drought resistant and thrives in hot summers. They prefer, sandy well-drained soil and are not very demanding. They bloom best if roots are kept pot bound and if placed in direct sunlight. Water regularly but let the soil dry out between waterings. Fertilize in the summer with 20-20-20 plant food or with Hibiscus fertilizer every 2 to 3 weeks.

Bougainvillea bloom on new growth. Proper pruning and pinching the tips continually encourages new growth, which means more blooms. A rule of thumb for summer pruning is to cut one-half of the growth that ends in a bloom once that bloom is finished. With proper pruning, feeding, and sunlight they will re-bloom every four weeks.

In winter when the temperatures drop the plants go dormant and shed their leaves. Move your potted bougainvilleas into the garage or a protected location and water the plants less frequently, about once a month. The canes look like they are dead but when the temperatures warm up in the spring they will develop new leaves. Move the plant to a sunny location when the temperatures stay above 60° and trim back the long shoots.

Bougainvilleas have very few insect problems, if any. Aphids are probably the only pest that attacks Bougainvillea. Treat them with an insecticide containing Pyrethrum.

If you are looking for an easy care plant that will add lots of color to your deck or patio this summer a bougainvillea is for you.