

Blooming Bougainvillea

**By Kim Gabel, Environmental Horticulture Agent
UF/IFAS/Monroe County Extension Service**

Bougainvilleas are certainly one of our most showy flowering plants and erupt in outrageous color in the winter. Native to South America, they are found growing throughout the tropics and are members of the four o'clock family, or Nyctaginaceae. The Bougainvillea is named for the French Navigator Louis A. de Bogainville, who discovered these plants in the vicinity of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

The plants are noted for the large showy paper-like bracts which bear the color protecting the small flowers that exist in groups of threes.

Popular bougainvillea varieties for landscape use are:

“Barbara Karst” has bright red bracts, almost constant bloomer.

“Mrs. Butt” has red to peach bracts, large repeat bloomer.

“Miami Pink” has dark pink bracts. Does best in the landscape.

“Tropical Bouquet” has orange bracts that quickly turn pink. It is a compact and bushy plant.

“California Gold” has large, long lasting gold bracts that can be considered as yellow in some environments. It has a nice vining habit.

Culture

Bougainvilleas can be grown in most soils, although they prefer slightly acidic conditions. They do best when planted in full sun and do poorly in dense shade. Both bush and climbing types need pruning to maintain size and vigor. Pruning after September and during the flowering season will greatly reduce the amount of flowering. Keep Bougainvillea on the dry side, especially if you want lots of blooms. Too much water will promote root rot and cause leaves to drop.

Fertilizing

Fertilizing established plants are best confined to spring and late summer. If fertilizer is applied after September or October, there is likely to be vegetative growth and little flowering. Spring fertilizer application use a balanced complete fertilizer, such as 6-6-6-3 (1/4-1/2 lb. per application). For the late summer fertilizer application, use a bloom-booster, such as 4-6-8. If minor elements (i.e., zinc, boron, manganese, etc.) are a problem, they can be solved with foliage applications. If iron deficiencies become apparent, a soil drench of chelated iron can be used.

Insect/Disease Problems

Diseases are not much of a problem and seldom warrant any spraying for control. Leafspots and a twig blight, which causes withering of new growth, are the most common.

Insect problems are the most serious problem. The number one pest is the Bougainvillea Caterpillar, *Asciodes gordialis*. This night time feeder is seldom seen except for the damage it leaves behind in the form of notched, gnawed, ratty foliage. The caterpillar can be controlled with an organic pesticide such as Dipel which is a trade name. The active ingredient is *Baccillus thuringensis*. It will not harm other insects or wildlife.

Remember, for Bougainvilleas to look their best in the Florida Keys, they are best located away from salt laden winds since they are only moderately salt wind tolerant and low salt tolerant to storm surge.

Additional information is available from the Monroe County Extension office, Gato Building, 1100 Simonton Street, Suite 2-260, Key West or call: 292-4501. Our services are free and available to all without regard to race, color, sex, or national origin.