

Bougainvillea as a Bonsai

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ARTICLE ID: 80

The Bougainvillea (*Bougainvillea spp.*)

Bougainvillea, named for a French navigator, is a native of South America and is grown extensively in the warmer climates of the United States. It is a member of the *Nyctaginaceae* family with close relatives being the four o'clock and the sand verbena. Bougainvillea is an evergreen vine which is just as happy spreading horizontally or hanging downwards as it is climbing upwards, it makes itself at home in almost any situation. It can be grown as a hedge purpose, groomed as a ground cover, pruned as an espalier, trained as a tree or contained in a pot in a variety of shapes. Its trunk tends to be gnarled.



Bougainvillea is ideal for bonsai available in various colours like red, violet, orange, yellow or white bracts which appear on the end so new growth and we can prune to different shapes. Available in nurseries and from bonsai specialty growers. A good source is from old gardens being redesigned and from trash piles where a frustrated home owner has thrown the thorny plant.

They flower most heavily in winter and early spring, but some plants put forth scattered clusters all year. The colours are found in tones of purple, lavender, carmine, scarlet, red, pink, orange, yellow and white. Single and double flower forms are available. Double forms tend to carry their blooms near the end of the stems rather than distributing them evenly over the plant. The colourful, papery "blooms" are not flowers; they are bracts. The true flower is white, trumpet shaped and almost unnoticeable within the bracts. Bougainvilleas are available in a variety of species, each having its unique characteristics.

Favourable conditions for growth:

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- ✚ **Temperature:** Being a warm weather plant they can usually tolerate die back from a freeze, but will with-hold blooms for awhile. Bougainvilleas are hardy throughout the South but young growth will be damaged by frost. Optimum growing temperatures are warm days (70°-85°F) and cool nights(60°-70°F). It can tolerate cooler temperatures but will drop its leaves and go dormant. A light frost will not kill the plant, but you can soon expect all the leaves and bracts to fall off. In this case, the plant will re-grow if not subjected to more frosts for longer duration.
- ✚ **Lighting:** Full sunshine minimum of 5 hours a day. Bright western or southern window exposure is ideal. Bougainvillea may drop it's leaves in the winter if there's not enough light.
- ✚ **Watering:** Sparse to light watering and good drainage. Low once established. Water regularly after planting to encourage a deep root system, then reduce to only as needed. Bougainvillea are drought-tolerant plants and perform beautifully in any xeriscape (Landscaping that doesn't require a lot of water), or other environmental design minimizing the need for water use. Do not over-water Increase watering in warmer times of the year, but remember to decrease watering as temperatures decreases and days become shorter. To induce flowering in the summer, allow the tree to dry out and wilt for three to four hours, then begin watering normally. Expect flower production to begin one to two weeks after wilting.
- ✚ **Fertilizing:** Fertilize once in the spring with a low nitrogen fertilizer and may be once again in the fall. Research at the University of Florida has found that plants flower best when given high nitrogen fertilizers and short day lengths (15 hours of darkness within every 24 hour period).Bougainvilleas like acidic soil, so supplement with an acidic fertilizer for azaleas or camellias at half strength once a month.
- ✚ **Pruning:** a useful attribute in styling bonsai. Because bougainvillea generally blooms on new growth, each branch, as blooms begin to fade, should be cut back to a point somewhat shorter than the desired length. Seal all cut stop reventrot. If rot is detected on a collected specimen, cutit out completely. After



each blooming cycle (approximately every 4-6 weeks), trim or pinch the soft tips of young plants stems to encourage new growth. Pinching means removing the growing tip. This will create multiple offshoots, thicken the plant's appearance, and yield a more colorful bougainvillea. Propagation and branch cuttings. Young shoots, a few inches in length, should be placed in sandy soil with Bougainvillea may be grown from air layers, root cuttings bottom heat and moisture. Half-ripened or old wood cuttings in six to twelve inch lengths may be rooted April to June.

✚ **Repotting:** Bougainvillea likes to be root-bound and should be repotted every two to three years, repotting in Spring. Bougainvillea will thrive in almost any well-drained and fertile soil. A good soil blend is 50% potting mix with 25% small lava rock and 25% Turface. It does not develop a strong fibrous root ball until the plant is quite old. Do not prune the roots too severely. Remove circling roots and extra-long woody roots, leaving shorter woody roots, which are needed to stabilize the tree. Keep as much of the fibrous roots as possible. Take care not to disturb the bougainvillea's delicate root system during planting or re-potting. Never pull on the stem of the plant as their weak roots can be easily severed. We highly recommend that you plant bougainvillea in their nursery pots with the bottom of the pot cut out. Use a quick-drain soil suitable for bougainvillea.

✚ **A good mix is one with design and Styling:** In form a upright, cascade, literate, twin trunk and forest are a few of the best but you should be able to make any style.

✚ **Species suitable for bonsai :**

Bougainvillea *brazilinensis*: 'Pink Pixie' bougainvillea.

Bougainvillea *buttiana* 'Golden Glow' - Has bright yellow bracts which fade to apricot.

Bougainvillea *buttiana* 'Louis Wathen' - orange bracts.

Bougainvillea *buttiana* 'Mrs. Butt' - crimson bracts.

Bougainvillea *buttiana* 'Orange King'.

Bougainvillea *glabra* 'Magnifica' - rose pink bracts.

Bougainvillea *glabra* 'Snow White' - white bracts.

Bougainvillea *peruviana* - rose pink bracts.

✚ **Insects and pests:** Caterpillars, aphids and green fly and mineral deficiencies



(chlorosis). Care must be taken that fungus does not invade the tree; reduced humidity and a preventive spraying of fungicide will help greatly.

