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Bougainvillea - Blooming good bonsai

Bougainvillea is one of the most versatile species for bonsai. Although it is not indigenous to South Africa it can be found throughout the country, and many nurseries stock them. They all produce flowers and if treated correctly a bougainvillea bonsai should produce a vibrant show of colour 4 times a year and for periods of up to six weeks in duration.

Bougainvillea do not have a very specific growth pattern and can be trained into almost any shape. Their branches are fairly flexible and take wiring very well. The variety of Bougainvillea are almost endless, but as always, the best ones to choose are those with smaller leaves and flowers.

This species originates in South America, but thrives throughout the world and can tolerate a wide variety of growing conditions. It was first "discovered" in Rio de Janeiro in about 1766 by French botanist Philibert Commerson and was named after Commerson's ship's captain Louis Antoine de Bougainville. Although there are eighteen species recorded almost all Bougainvillea, and the multitude of hybrids found outside of South America stem from only three species, *B. spectabilis*, *B. glabra* and *B. buttiana*.

Bougainvillea like LOTS of sun and water, and fairly coarse soil, but will grow fairly well in shaded areas although the blooms, if any, will be fewer and less vibrant in colour, and the plant tends to become very leggy and sparse. Its flowering sequence is quite interesting. It blooms for six weeks and then has a seven week resting period. Five weeks into the rest period one should reduce the water supply which will put the tree into a false winter mode resulting in more spectacular flowers. This principle works for a large number of species, both local and exotic, hold back on the water and flowers result.

The flowers proliferate towards the ends of the branches so it is best to wait until after the tree has flowered before pruning. This tree does not like to sleep at night with wet leaves, especially in winter. If you water the tree in the evenings it may lose all of its leaves. Bougainvillea are fairly trouble free plants. They are not prone to getting infested with bugs, and the ones that do inhabit the tree are not known to do any damage, so go very easy on the poisons. They are vigorous growers so feed them frequently during the growing season.

The wood of the bougainvillea is quite hard and is very good for carving jins and sharis, but be warned, you must treat exposed deadwood with Flowers of Sulphur (available from most pharmacies) to prevent the wood from rotting.

I think that all bonsai enthusiasts should have at least one Bougainvillea in their collection. They really are very rewarding for both the experienced and the novice alike.