

Bougainvillea



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One of the loveliest vining shrubs for warm climates is bougainvillea. With its cascading habit and vivid blossoms whose colors can range from fuchsia to bright red to purple, it makes a powerful visual impact. No wonder so many people want it in their gardens!

It is commonly found in Arizona landscapes, but here in Southern Nevada it is less abundant. There are good reasons for this, since the intrepid gardener who wishes to succeed with this native of coastal Brazil needs to take extra care.

Bougainvillea has traits that make it a possible addition to Mojave gardens, but it can also suffer in our environment. On the desirable side, it is generally salt-tolerant. Southern Nevada soils have the unfortunate tendency to contain high levels of salt, which is the residue of the ancient ocean that once covered this terrain. Many otherwise desirable plants suffer from salt burn when they are grown here. Not only is it salt tolerant, but being from the tropics it appreciates warm weather, another reason for its possible inclusion into local landscapes. While it requires deep, regular watering during its early development period (in particular, its first growing season), once it is firmly established in the soil, it is moderately drought tolerant. It is often grown as a bushy vine trained on some kind of trellis, which protects it from the gusty winds plants must endure.

While all of these characteristics might lead one to think that bougainvillea could be the ideal plant for this desert, it is not. The Mojave is not like the Sonora, nor like tropical Brazil. In this part of the world, heat and dry conditions are not the only determining factors. Among the challenges gardeners face here, in addition to salty, infertile soil, high summer temperatures, strong winds and a paltry amount of precipitation, is the winter and unpredictable spring.

The southern Nevada winter might not be anything noteworthy in comparison to that of Maine or Minnesota, but it definitely can get cold enough to damage tropical plants. These vines, shrubs or herbaceous plants evolved in an area where frost does not occur. When temperatures drop well below freezing for a sustained time, the plants can be frost-killed down to the ground.

Fortunately, it is not a hopeless situation for gardeners who are intent on having bougainvillea's fabulous display. A certain level of commitment and work can improve the plant's chances of survival through most of our winters. About every ten years, the temperatures remain in the freezing range for an extended period. This can kill off many tropicals, but most of the time, that is not the case.



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Make sure to plant it where it is protected from the fiercest (and coldest) winds. Plant when soils have started to warm up in early spring. Make sure to cover the soil with organic mulch like straw or bark. If it has the chance to become well established before the onset of cold weather, it may die down to the ground in winter, but emerge (phoenix-like) in the spring.

Dr. Angela O'Callaghan is the Social Horticulture Specialist for Clark County Cooperative Extension. Contact ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu or 702-257-5581.