



Summer Splendor: Bougainvilleas Bring Color to Stanford

Each summer, Stanford University transforms into a vibrant canvas of color, and few plants contribute to that beauty more than the bougainvillea. Draped over walls, climbing trellises, and cascading from planters, these striking vines create breathtaking displays of magenta, purple, pink, orange, red, and white throughout the campus. Against Stanford's iconic sandstone buildings and blue California skies, bougainvilleas add warmth, energy, and a distinctly Mediterranean charm that welcomes students, faculty, staff, and visitors alike.

Although many people admire their colorful "flowers," the brilliant display is actually made up of papery modified leaves called **bracts**. The true flowers are the small white blossoms nestled in the center of each cluster. Their vivid bracts can bloom for months, making bougainvilleas one of the longest-lasting highlights of Stanford's summer landscape.

Caring for Bougainvilleas During Summer

Bougainvilleas are well suited to California's warm, dry climate, but they perform best when their basic needs are met. Proper watering, feeding, and occasional pruning help keep these beautiful vines healthy and blooming throughout the season.

Watering

One of the most common mistakes is watering bougainvilleas too frequently. Once established, they are remarkably drought tolerant and actually bloom more profusely when the soil is allowed to dry slightly between waterings.

During the summer:

- Water deeply rather than frequently.
- Allow the top few inches of soil to dry before watering again.
- Plants growing in containers require more frequent watering than those planted in the ground.
- Avoid constantly wet soil, which can lead to root problems and excessive leafy growth with fewer blooms.

Deep, infrequent irrigation encourages strong root development and supports abundant flowering.

Feeding

Bougainvilleas are not heavy feeders, but they benefit from regular nutrition during the growing season.

For healthy growth and continuous blooms:

- Apply a balanced, slow-release fertilizer every six to eight weeks during spring and summer.
- Alternatively, use a water-soluble fertilizer formulated for flowering plants every two to four weeks.
- Choose fertilizers with moderate nitrogen and slightly higher phosphorus and potassium to encourage flowering rather than excessive foliage.

Too much nitrogen can produce lush green leaves at the expense of the colorful bracts that make bougainvilleas so spectacular.

Sunlight

Bougainvilleas thrive in full sun and require **at least six hours of direct sunlight each day** for their best floral display. The more sunshine they receive, the more vibrant and abundant their blooms become.

Pruning and Maintenance

Light pruning after a flush of blooms helps maintain an attractive shape and encourages new flowering growth. Removing dead branches and spent bracts also improves airflow and keeps plants looking their best.

Because bougainvilleas have sharp thorns, gloves and long sleeves are recommended when pruning or performing routine maintenance.

A Signature of Stanford Summers

Bougainvilleas are more than ornamental plants—they have become part of Stanford's summer identity. Their brilliant colors soften architectural lines, brighten walkways, and create memorable spaces where the campus community gathers, studies, and celebrates. With thoughtful care and California sunshine, these resilient vines continue to flourish year after year. As summer unfolds, these vibrant vines continue to brighten Stanford's gardens, pathways, and courtyards, creating a colorful campus that inspires everyone who visits, studies, and works here.

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