

When my parents got married—just before my father was due to ship out for Korea—they honeymooned in a cottage piled with bougainvillea. The cottage was in Laguna, the vine was a violent purple and a swag of it crowned the threshold, which Dad undoubtedly crossed carrying Mom. For me, the romance of this image has never faded, even though Dad never made it to Korea (he came down with mononucleosis) and my parents eventually divorced. When I see a bougainvillea, I feel a complicated thrill. A wistful pain. An awareness that tragedy inevitably shadows happiness. But those gaudy ruffles make me optimistic, too. They define an almost hysterical passion. That's what bougainvillea is: a scorch on a wall, a scream across a parking lot. But it can also, in its paler shades, be a whisper.

Named for Louis Antoine de Bougainville, an 18th century French explorer who circled the world for Louis XV, bougainvillea is a Brazilian native that grows in hot climates around the globe. Its colors range from that juicy, emotive purple to tremu-

Vine Madness

Swept Away by Bougainvillea and the Passions It Inspires. By Susan Heeger

lous red, gold, pink and purest white. Those papery buds aren't flowers, though. They're bracts—specialized leaf clusters that hold the tiny sprigs of true blooms. They don't smell either (but a lot of poets and novelists don't know that). What these plants will do if they're happy is grow like mad—climbing 20 feet up a fence, crawling sideways to cover a bank or erupting from a hanging pot. They thrive in coastal air, enjoy the desert too (especially the magenta 'Barbara Karst') and even prosper indoors.

To a dedicated Angeleno like me, there are few visions of heaven equal to a sleepy courtyard with a fountain and a splatter of bougainvillea. "It's a local icon. Part of who we are," says landscape architect Katherine Spitz, who admits sneaking bougainvillea into almost every garden she designs. Of course, being Angelenos, we reason, if a little is good, why not more? Wherever you look in this city, people have gone too far, letting

Continued on Page 60