

Plant Supports

By Kathy Wolfe
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A project for winter

The gardening off-season is a great time to catch up on tasks we were too busy to do during the gardening year such as sharpening tools, cleaning plant pots for future seeding sessions, culling out old seed packets and ordering new seeds, and reassessing our landscape. Another project worth tackling is to review your needs for plant supports.

Tall or top-heavy plants often could use help to look their best. If your site is in a windy area, this can affect how well your plants can stand up on their own or if they need an assist. If you are looking to fit more plants into your landscape, you can conserve space by keeping plants upright rather than sprawling. Fruits and vegetables can get lifted toward the sun and will be easier to harvest if offered some support.

When you correctly place a framework into the plant to encourage good air circulation, dry leaves, pests and diseases are discouraged from becoming established. Plant supports can also provide a decorative and interesting focal point while also being hard at work helping plants look their best.

The most common plant supports include stakes, teepees, cages and hoops, trellises and arbors. Different plants benefit from different supports based on their growing habits, but many can thrive with various systems.

Let's start with the simple stake. A single bamboo, metal or wooden stake works well with sprawling plants that need to be tied upright. Sunflowers, tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, cucumbers and *Dahlias* are examples of plants that could use staking. Stakes are easy to use and inexpensive to make or buy. Just drive the stake a foot or two into the soil and 2-3" from the plant's stem. Firmly but loosely tie on the plant, making sure the stem won't be strangled as it gets larger. Add additional ties as needed during the season. It is best to place all supports early to help train the plants to grow upward and to avoid damaging tubers and roots which mature as the plant continues to grow.

Teepee supports work best with twiners like beans where the main stem grows in a spiral around the support. Teepees can be made using sturdy poles or bamboo stalks that are lashed together at the top. Decide how tall and how many poles you want in your design. It is best to err in favor of too much support rather than having your plant fall into itself mid-season because it outgrew or overweighed its support system.



All three styles of plant supports shown here provide unique visual interest while showcasing colorful climbers. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Cages are great for tendrill climbers, which use their slender appendages growing from the stems or stalks to wrap around the support and pull themselves up, e.g. peas. Both cages and hoops offer help for sprawling and bushy plants like peonies, *Phlox*, *Dahlias*, tomatoes, melons, grapes and squash. Cages are readily available in garden centers but can be made using livestock or fencing panels found at your farmer's supply or hardware store, concrete reinforcement mesh, wood or plastic pipe. There are numerous design ideas for do-it-yourself projects on the internet and in garden books at your local library.

Trellises come in many shapes and sizes, from the simple nylon mesh netting attached between two stakes to the ornate ironwork designs found in high-end nurseries. You could use a wall or an existing fence (or recycled one) as a trellis if you have one available in a desired location. Often, peas (both edible and sweet florals), *Clematis*, beans and hops use this type of support. Large trees and shrubs can act as a kind of trellis helping *Clematis* or rambling roses reach for the sunshine.

Arbors are good for supporting honeysuckle, *Jasmine*, *Clematis*, climbing roses or any twiners or tendrill climbers that easily twist their way through the slats and other parts of the structure. Arbors can be made from rebar and concrete reinforcement mesh, as a freestanding wooden structure, or purchased in a garden center where they often are manufactured using vinyl, wood, steel or iron.



Left: This simple wire cage's ornamental crown provides a touch of whimsy to the garden. **Above:** The sunflower cage in a children's garden holds up heavy flower heads as well as creating a small secret garden within its walls. Photos by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.

If you are feeling creative and in need of some plant supports, check out your garage, basement or shed to see if you can give any unused items a second life as a plant support. Landscape trimmings can be cut for staking or used as poles to support trellising material or in a teepee. Twig prunings have been used historically to support pea plants in the garden. You might consider an old ladder, hula hoops or old pallets, a screen door or window frame that is no longer in use, or a bed frame or mattress springs that have seen better days.

There are some very creative supports made from old bicycle rims like those used in the Discovery Garden rose garden installation. Keep your eyes open on garden tours, in garden books and on the internet for more ideas to keep your plants happily growing in the year ahead.

RESOURCES:

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<https://www.fix.com/blog/learn-all-about-garden-supports/>
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<https://www.diyncrafts.com/37889/home/gardening/15-diy-plant-supports-and-cages-you-need-in-your-summer-garden>
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- “What is an Arbor Used for?” Lisa Hallett Taylor, The Spruce, updated August 31, 2017.

<https://www.thespruce.com/what-is-an-arbor-used-for-2736931>