

A Fine Time for Vines

By Jessamyn Tuttle
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Make your garden look complete

A common lament of gardeners is having no more room to put plants. But what about vines? Vines are a wonderful way of expanding the garden upwards, even when space is scarce. They can hide eyesores, soften structures, create shade, or mingle with other plants to increase texture and interest in the garden. Which vines you plant should depend not just on what color flowers you want, but what purpose the vine will serve in the garden and what kind of growth habit you are looking for.

Not all vines grow the same way. They climb using different methods: some twine, some have clinging tendrils, some use aerial roots to cling directly to surfaces. In addition, some vines are annuals, dying after a single season of bloom, while perennial vines may die to the ground but come back the next year. Some are even woody perennials that remain structural year-round.

Annual vines are easy to grow, fun to experiment with, and a good way to add seasonal vertical interest without needing massive supports or elaborate pruning. Sweet peas (*Lathyrus odoratus*) are a wonderful choice, growing easily from seed and using tendrils to climb up any kind of structure from fencing to string, providing both color and wonderful fragrance. Other great annual vines include black eyed susan (*Thunbergia alata*), Spanish flag (*Mina lobata*), purple hyacinth bean (*Dolichos lablab*), and morning glory (*Ipomoea spp.*, not to be confused with the noxious weed hedge bindweed, which is also referred to as morning glory). Another great annual vine is nasturtiums (*Tropaeolum majus*), which throw out long runners that can scramble through other plants but won't climb on their own.

If you are ready to commit to a perennial vine addition to your garden, *Clematis* is always a good choice. Available in a wide range of colors and sizes, there is a *Clematis* for nearly any garden situation. Winter *Clematis* (*C. armandii*) has attractive evergreen leaves and white flowers in late winter/early spring, *C. montana* grows to enormous lengths and blooms in a blizzard of pink in mid spring, while sweet autumn *Clematis* (*C. terniflora*) puts out new growth all summer and ends in a bloom of small ivory flowers that scent the late summer garden. Beyond these there are many beautiful June-blooming hybrid *Clematis* in nearly any color.

Other popular perennial vines include golden hops (*Humulus lupulus aureus*), honeysuckle (*Lonicera spp.*), and Akebia (*A. quinata*), all of which do an excellent job of covering fences and arbors quite quickly. Passionflower vine (*Passiflora spp.*), is not always hardy here in Western Washington, but the species *P. caerulea* is particularly tough, with large elaborate blue and white flowers that usually begin opening in mid to late summer and continue on until frost. And

Wisteria (*Wisteria spp.*), of course, is a garden classic, a twining, fast growing woody vine with huge panicles that bloom in the spring, at its best growing over a sturdy arbor where the flowers can dangle over a pathway or sitting area.



Honeysuckle is grown for both its color and scent. Photo by Jessamyn Tuttle / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardener.

Clinging vines use aerial rootlets to attach themselves to tree trunks, fences, or walls. Climbing *Hydrangea* (*Hydrangea anomala petiolaris*) is a beautiful woody vine, usually with white flowers, which grows happily along a wall or fence, or up a large tree, in either sun or shade. These may be slow to establish but once they get going, they can be spectacular. Another attractive clinging vine (related to Boston ivy) is silvertree creeper (*Parthenocissus henryana*), which is grown for its showy foliage and fall color, can cope with shade and is quite drought tolerant once established. Keep in mind that clinging vines can be hard to remove and may cause damage if allowed to grow directly on brick or painted surfaces such as your house.

If you would like your vines to be edible as well as ornamental, grapes (*Vitis spp.*) can be grown for either fresh eating or wine production. Hardy kiwi (*Actinidia arguta*) is also beautiful, but requires both a male and a female plant to bear fruit. Or you could simply plant scarlet runner beans (*Phaseolus coccineus*), which sprout easily, have beautiful flowers that attract pollinators, and are edible both in the pod and shelled.

Whichever vine you choose, familiarize yourself with the pruning requirements of that particular species, which can vary widely. Some woody vines like *Clematis montana* bloom on the

previous year's growth and so should not be pruned until after flowering, while autumn *Clematis* bloom on new season's growth and so are often cut down nearly to the ground in early spring. *Wisteria* requires at least two very hard prunings every year to keep it well behaved.

And as with any new plant, always keep in mind the mature size and growth habit of your new vine, as they can easily become more than we bargained for. Not just actively invasive weeds like hedge bindweed, English ivy, and blackberry, but even common garden plants like honeysuckle or trumpet vine can take over a garden if left unpruned. A mature *Wisteria* vine can be heavy enough to collapse insufficiently sturdy supports, or smother a nearby shrub. A little research up front will help you choose the right vine to make your garden look complete.



Passion Flower brings a tropical look to the garden. Photo by Jessamyn Tuttle / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardener.

RESOURCES:

- <https://web.extension.illinois.edu/vines/>
- <https://www.chicagobotanic.org/plantinfo/vines>
- <https://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/gardens-gardening/your-garden/help-for-the-home-gardener/advice-tips-resources/visual-guides/ornamental-vines.aspx>
- <https://landscapeplants.oregonstate.edu/>
- <https://www.greatplantpicks.org>
- Cass Turnbull's Guide to Pruning, 3rd edition