

Restoring a Grapevine

By Lee Reich

Illustration by Elayne Sears



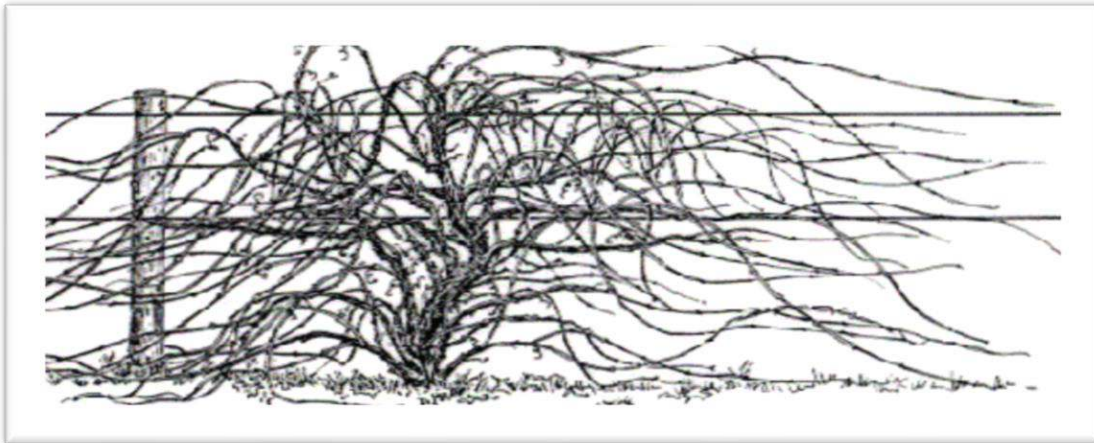
FEW GARDEN SIGHTS are as sorry as an untended grapevine. Its branches become so tangled that sunlight and air no longer dry them readily, making the plant prone to disease. The grapes become difficult to harvest because they are out of reach. But even a vine that has been neglected for years can be coaxed into bearing good crops once again. Proper pruning will bring the vine back to a manageable size and enable it to channel energy into making fewer but larger bunches of fruit.

It sometimes takes several seasons to get a vine back into shape, depending on how long it has been

neglected. For an extremely overgrown specimen, it may be necessary to lop the entire plant back to the ground, then select trunk, canes, and spurs over the next two or three seasons.

When pruning the branches, leave a short stub so the vine can heal. A half-inch stub is fine in most cases; on larger branches, leave a stub equal to half the diameter of the wood. Also, avoid making a cut too near to a bud you wish to save, for a bud too close to a wound will dry out. Grapevines commonly bleed sap when cut but this does not harm the plant.

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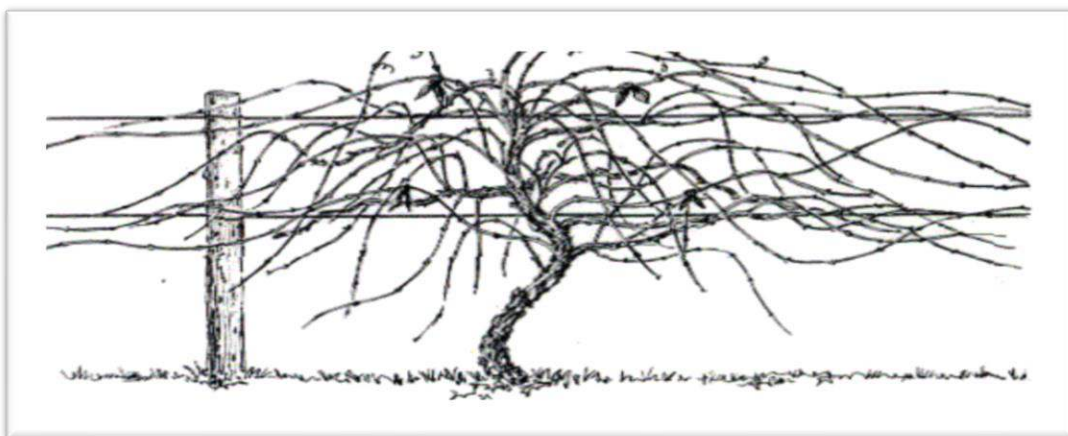


FORMING A TRUNK

The first step toward taming your neglected grapevine is to create a trunk. Choose one healthy vertical branch arising from the base of the plant. It needn't be the oldest or biggest one; indeed, a slightly younger trunk is often more vigorous. (In northern areas, choose two trunks to provide insurance in the event that winter kills one trunk to the ground.) Then cut away all other low shoots. The tangle will now be much reduced.

SELECTING FRUITING CANES

Grapevines produce fruit each year on shoots that grow off the previous year's branches, called canes. Canes are easily recognized by their smooth, tan bark; the bark of older wood is dark and peeling.



Select four canes that originate as close to the trunk as possible; two growing horizontally in opposite directions at about waist height, and two growing horizontally in opposite directions

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at about head height. The most fruitful canes are pencil-thick with about six inches of space between buds. Mark the four you've chosen with a ribbon, but don't cut them yet.

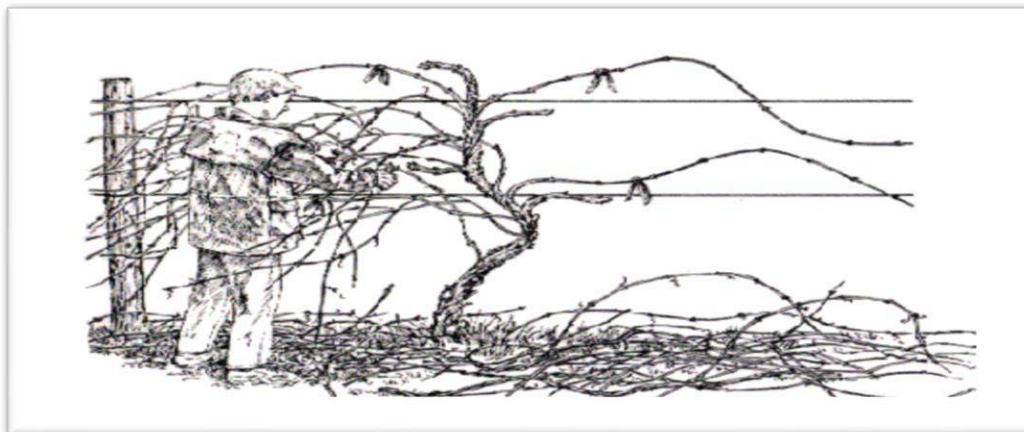
SAVING RENEWAL SPURS

Renewal spurs furnish buds that will grow into canes this season and produce next season's fruit. In order to keep future fruit within reach, the spurs must originate near the trunk. Choose four branches at about the same height as your chosen canes. The age of these branches is not critical, but be sure that there are buds visible near their bases. Cut each branch back to two buds.



REMOVING UNNEEDED WOOD

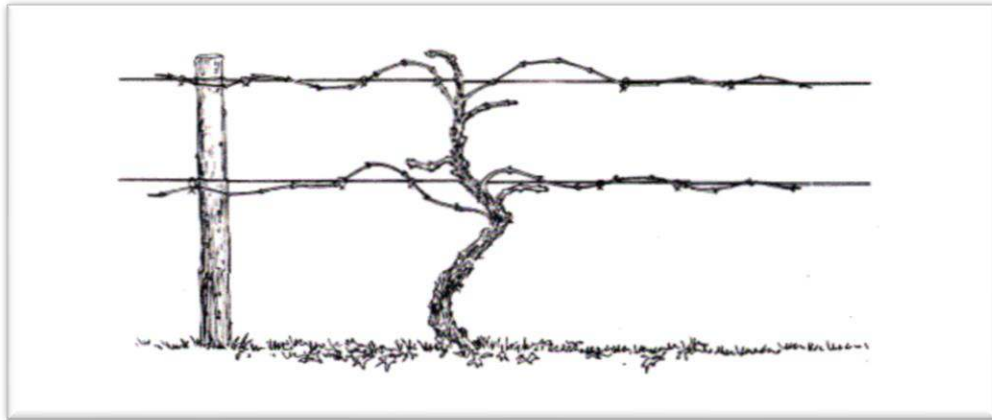
Completely cut away all remaining wood except the four renewal spurs and the four tagged fruiting canes. Much of the remaining growth on the plant will probably be long and tangled, so you'll have to remove branches in pieces. After you cut each piece, give it a tug to release it from clinging tendrils, then slide it free. Shorten the trunk to just above the top canes or spurs.



SHORTENING FRUITING CANES

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Now that your fruiting canes are free from the tangle, shorten them. Leave about 10 buds on each cane (not counting those clustered at the base), or about 40 buds per plant. Leave more buds on vigorous vines, less on weak vines. Twist the shortened canes around the trellis wire, if it is still intact, or tie them loosely to some other type of support.



For continued production, repeat this process each winter, selecting and shortening new fruiting canes, leaving renewal spurs, and removing all other wood except for the trunk.