

## Primer On Vines

By Cass Turnbull

### Defining Vines

Vines are those plants that can't stand up on their own. No backbones, as it were. They need outside support to get up to the sunlight, where they will flower and/or fruit. In nature, the support system is usually a nearby tree or other plant. Another word for 'tree' is 'arbor', as in Arbor Day. Was the first grape arbor a tree? Nowadays, vines have trained people to provide support for them. You know, like trellises, walls, arbors, and pergolas as well as ornamental trees and shrubs.

### Kinds of Vines

There are all kinds of ornamental and fruiting vines, and ways to categorize them. I like to divide them according to their support needs. Some, like clematis and grapes twine or lash themselves onto an **open support system** (wire or lattice). Think of Indiana Jones' bull whip being used to lash onto a tree limb so he can swing across the open pit. Then there are those such as ivy, trumpet vine, and Virginia creeper that cling or grab onto **flat surfaces**. These vines have hairy, aerial roots or suction cups. Think of the suction cups on an octopus leg. Then there are those that use the grappling hook method of getting up in the world, like bougainvillea and climbing roses. The pirate throws a rope with a grappling hook onto your ship and swings over with a knife between his teeth. Why should you know these differences? So that you will use the proper support system. A twiner can't get up a concrete wall, but a climber prefers one. Your hooker, er, I mean hooking vine would like to get to the top of a pergola (or your shed roof) and spread out. Note that most climbing roses need some canes to travel horizontally in order to bloom. If you want to train the rose on a vertical trellis, you will need to tie it on, bend new lateral canes to the horizontal and tie them in. And be sure to periodically remove the old ties before they girdle canes.

### Why Vines?

I like vines. I study gardens trying to figure out what make them look good, and have concluded that the easiest way to turn an ordinary landscape into a glamorous garden is to add a vine or two. They figure prominently in garden magazine photos and coffee table books. They can double your blooms or add a second season of color to a shrub or tree. My Clematis montana climbed into the lilac bush one year, blooming pink at the same time the lilac bloomed lavender. Suddenly catching sight of it, framed by the lace curtains of my living room window, almost made me swoon. Another year it ran up a rhody which appeared to bloom soft pink (the clematis) and later, dark pink (the rhody). A clever gardener of my acquaintance planted a clematis with dainty white flowers to grow through, and contrast, the leaves of her purple-leaf plum tree. Fabulous! She plans her garden triumphs. For most of us, they are just lucky happenstance. Vines maximize garden space by growing up, and not out. This is great for people with small urban yards. Vines

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are also useful for hiding unwanted views (e.g., the top of a chain-link fence) to fill an empty, blank wall, or to cover the ugly brown fence.

## **Minding Vines**

Unfortunately, vines are not, generally speaking, a low maintenance proposition. Along with hybrid roses and fruit trees, vines are for the industrious and forgiving gardener. I think of vines as the problem children of the plant world. If you don't constantly mind them, they get into trouble. They are known to run away from home, fall off walls, go where they have been forbidden, and some can damage your house. Periodically, they get really scruffy looking. Many don't play nice with others. Some are rightly considered juvenile delinquents--English ivy (*Hedera helix*) and silverlace vine (*Polygonum aubertii*). Still others have been tried and convicted as adults: kudzu in the south, morning glory here, and of late, the escaped clematis that is naturalizing and taking over greenbelts. But, don't get me wrong. I like vines. Really, I do. I own several. And my friends tell me there are even some well-behaved ones. Give me a minute and I'll try to think of some.

## **Pruning Vines**

Now that you know that your vine's mission in life is to climb up your tree and smother it, you can start to think of pruning as a way of keeping it controlled. A common scenario is that of the new gardener bringing home a vine from the nursery, say a clematis, and planting it next to the house. They tie it to that cute little fan-shaped trellis on the wall. The first two years it grows to the right size, blooms and looks great. But a few years later, all the flowers are at the ends of the vine that has grown over the roof, into the neighbor's yard and up his tree. The bottom of the vine (the part still on the cute fan-shaped trellis) has turned into fat, barren, ugly stems. And in the winter, the vine looks pretty bad. In fact, it looks like what the plumber pulled out of the p-trap under the clogged sink.

Pruning is done to keep a vine, especially the flowering or fruiting part of a vine, where it is wanted, which is to say, near-by. And pruning a foliage vine—say Boston ivy which has reached the top of the house—is done to keep it from heading into the gutters and onto the roof. And from covering up the windows. Pruning can also minimize the ugly periods in the life cycle of many vines, and that includes the evergreen vines, *Clematis armandii* and *Akebia* (*Akebia* sp.).

Such pruning can be quite radical looking. Some clematis vines are cut to a foot off the ground, annually. Sometimes you take the power hedge shears to the tangled clematis or honeysuckle mess gathered on top of the fence. Sometimes you chisel, rip and cut the clinging vine half-way back down the wall, or maybe even back down to the bottom. Don't worry. It will grow back as much as 10 feet or more in two years. Other vines have 90% of the new growth cut off annually, like the climbing roses, grapes and wisterias. The practice of this large-scale pruning seems so radical that it is often incomprehensible to the new gardener.

## **What Can Go Wrong?**

I suspect that not much can go wrong with pruning on vines, at least not the common ones listed here. If you prune your clematis at the 'wrong' time it will just delay, not prevent blooming. This is only a big deal if, say, you chose the variety of clematis to bloom simultaneously with the climbing rose it is threaded through. If you are pruning just to get it off of the wood pile, timing is not very important. And, I suppose if you pruned a vine too often, say every-other week, it wouldn't have enough time to set up flower buds and bloom. You must **allow time and space** for the plant to grow and set up flower buds. This is why it doesn't work to cut the vine back to the top of the fan-shaped trellis. After pruning, it resumes growth from the cut ends. It grows new shoots for a while, then it sets up flower buds and blooms on top of the roof. Instead, you need to cut a stem down to an inch or so from the ground. There it breaks bud, grows up with several new stems, to three feet tall where it blooms on, not over, the trellis.

## **The Young Clematis Vine**

I suppose I should warn you not to heavily prune a clematis before it gets established, say in four or five years. Sometimes hard pruning a young clematis can kill it. (Although some books actually recommend cutting new clematis vines to three buds, i.e. 2 inches, I assume, to create multiple stems.) In fact, it seems to me that new clematis vines are prone to dying at the drop of a hat in any case. Don't bump it, or step on it, or let your dog near it for a few years. Maybe protect it with a little chicken wire fence. But don't let the vine grow through it. Later, it will be tough as nails.

## **Renovation for Old Vines**

Gardeners commonly renovate old, abandoned vines of all kinds by cutting them down to the ground, or more accurately, to a foot above. Sometimes you cut a vine way back to a manageable framework, and then retrain the rampant new growth in coming years. The vines rarely, if ever, die. Instead, they grow back amazingly fast and look better than ever. Okay, occasionally making a big cut on a really old clematis stem/trunk will kill it. So, if it has three big old stems (by big, I mean 3/4" to 1" diameter), only cut one or two this year. Save one for back up. If you only have only one really big, old stem, grit your teeth and do it. Or you could decide you like the way your vine blooms on top of the basketball hoop.

## **My Best Advice**

Having witnessed many people's successes and failures with vines, I proffer the following advice: Plant one and only one vine per arbor, trellis or wall. Give your vine a lot of room. Really, a lot more room than you are planning. And use a trellis or arbor that is much bigger than the ones you commonly see in garden centers. By the time a vine gets going and blooming on one of those, you won't be able to walk through it. The arbor needs to be two to five feet taller and wider than you so that the vine can gracefully spill off. A clinging vine needs a lot of room too, like one entire side of your house. It won't work to put it on the mail box post. It's not enough space. And, given

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that many vines have an ugly phase, put that arbor or trellis away from the front porch, maybe down below in the garden. With some distance, the vine still looks elegant even when the leaves are mildewed, black spotted, aphid ridden or gone for the winter.

## Summary

Many vines are pruned heavily, either once in a while, or annually. This is done to keep them blooming and/or fruiting nearby, or to prevent them from overcoming the house, the tree, or the garden. Hard pruning can minimize the ugly stage in the life of many vines.

## List of Vines

### Twiners

**Clematis** (Clematis sp.)—Beautiful flowers, interesting seed heads. Montana and armandii are most vigorous. Many others are more well behaved. Ugly phase is winter (tangled mess) for all, including the evergreen vine (yucky leaves). Difficult to get out of shrubs and trees.

**Honeysuckle** (Lonicera)—Sweet- smelling flowers. Ugly phase is summer (chronically aphid ridden) and winter (tangled mess).

### Passion flower/Passion vine

(Passiflora)—Exotic looking flowers. Ugly phase is winter (tangled mess, dead stuff on bottom).

**Akebia** (Akebia sp.)—Evergreen, small

purplish blooms. Because of small blooms vine is best located outside the back door or a window. Its ugly phase is fall/winter (black spots on leaves). Can produce unwanted seedlings and can rip off siding.

**Grape** (Vitis sp.)—Ornamental and fruiting. Nice leaves, and grapes. Most kinds could cover up a tree, easy. Annual pruning and tying needed. A really nice new purple leaf ornamental grape is now available. I bet it is less vigorous.

**Kiwi** (Actinidia sp.)—Makes kiwi fruit, has nifty fuzzy stems. The fruiting kiwi vine needs to be tied to a stout and sturdy trellis. It wants 30 feet. That is the length of a house. Male and female plants are needed for fruit (most kinds) and remember one mature vine can produce fully one ton, that's 2,000 pounds, of fruit. There is a wonderful variegated ornamental species (A. kolomikta). Its leaves are green, pink, white and rose on the same plant. Many leaves are green splashed with white. It can burn in direct sun. It only needs 15 feet.

**Wisteria** (Wisteria sp.)—Beautiful blooms and, when pruned regularly, can have an interesting winter structure. Reckless, fast growing and strong. It gets under shingles, rips up fences, tears apart balconies, sneaks by runners on the ground over to distant plants and jumps onto nearby trees. Prune off 90% of new growth every year. These are the runners/ whips, soft and about as big around as an electrical cord. Leave unpruned the stiff parts: the trunk, scaffolds, and flowering spur systems spaced roughly one foot apart from each other.

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## **Clinger/Grabbers**

**Ivy** (*Hedera* sp.)—*H. helix* (English) and *H. canariensis* (Algerian) are considered too vigorous. But others are better behaved. One, *Hedera confusa*, cathedral ivy, is a truly small vine with interesting overlapping spires when grown on a wall. Needs only 2' x 2'. Good for foundation walls, fences, the water meter (with a cut-out for the dial face), lamp posts, etc.

## **Boston Ivy/Virginia Creeper**

(*Parthenocissus* sp.)—Great red fall color. These deciduous vines have nice winter pattern especially on concrete walls with seams. Difficult to get off wood siding for painting, get under shingles. Need a lot of wall space, like 30' x 30'.

**Climbing Hydrangea** (*Hydrangea anomala*)—A lovely, well-behaved vine. Pretty white flowers. Looks good in the winter. The only clinging vine recommended for growing up an established tree's trunk. Good for short (vertically) walls.

**Trumpet Vine** (*Campsis* sp.)—Cool, orange, trumpet-shaped flowers. Needs a lot of wall space, like 20' X 20'. Not well-behaved. Spreads by suckering roots. When dug, tiny bits left in soil grow into plants.

## **Hooking Vines/Plants**

**Climbing Rose** (*Rosa* sp.)—Beautiful, sweet-smelling flowers. Needs tying. Bend young canes horizontally to promote flowering. Ugly phase is summer/fall (black spot on leaves). Like others of its kind, stems of these plants can cause pain (thorns).