

Whack ‘Em Back! Summer Pruning of Ornamental Vines

By Laura Watson

Vines have no backbones of their own. They make their way up in the world by hanging on to something that DOES—fences, houses, arbors, trees, and telephone poles, for example. If they can't find anything, they scramble around on the ground searching for that special something to lead them upwards into the sky and the sunshine.

Ideally, we should all choose vines whose nature can fit comfortably in the spaces we allot to them in our gardens, but instead we often plant vines that will eventually be way too big. Then we have to prune them vigorously to contain and guide them and, in the case of flowering vines, maximize blooms.

Most vines grow rampantly in summer and need pruning touch ups several times during the season—in some cases they need a serious overhaul. Most especially, remove the four Ds—stems that are dead, diseased, damaged, or deranged. Don't be afraid, because vines are genetically programmed to GROW and then grow more, then even more! You can't kill a vine by pruning (well, hardly ever).

Before we dive into the details of summer vine pruning, we should take a look at three important factors about vines.

1. Bloom time—either in spring on old (last year's) growth or in summer on new (this year's) growth.
2. Methods of climbing—rootlets, thorns, twining leaf stems, twining tendrils, and twining growing tips.
3. Apical Dominance or Boss Bud Syndrome—whereby the highest bud tries to suppress growth of side shoots.

When Does It Bloom?

One big factor in how vines grow in summer is whether they bloom in spring or in summer. Those that bloom in spring (up to about mid-June) bloom on old growth—that is, the blooms that come out in spring were already formed during the previous summer and fall. Vines that bloom in summer (after about mid-June) bloom on new growth, so they need to grow like crazy in spring and early summer to set flowers and bloom by mid-to-late summer.

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Spring bloomers flower from March through about mid-June in the Maritime Pacific Northwest. They require only very light pruning in winter or early spring—otherwise the nascent flower buds that were already formed during the past year will be cut off. Note: wisteria is the exception—wisteria stems can be cut off throughout the year, because they bloom on flowering spurs, not the vines. Flowering spurs are short stubby projections from the major framework of the plant that produce all the flowers on the plant.

Once blooming is over, spring bloomers concentrate on throwing new vines and setting new flowers for the following year. They generally need summer pruning to control their desire to grow bigger than their given space. Spring bloomers include akebia, climbing hydrangea, spring-blooming clematis, and wisteria.

Summer bloomers can be pruned hard in winter or early spring because they haven't formed any flower buds yet. All during spring and early summer, they throw new vines and set flowers for summer blooming.

Summer pruning involves removing errant, ugly, or overly long vines. Vines in this group include summer-blooming clematis, climbing roses, honeysuckle vines, passionflower, sweet peas, and trumpet vine.

How Does It Climb?

Understanding which mechanism a vine uses to reach for the heavens helps the gardener to understand how they grow, how to support them, and how to prune them. The five basic types of climbers include:

Clingers: These vines have small rootlets or suckers all along their stems that slowly attach themselves to large flat surfaces, like the side of a house, a fence, or the trunk of a large tree. They won't grow on wire, string, cyclone fences, or small trees or shrubs. Included in this group are: Boston ivy, Virginia creeper, and trumpet vine—oh, and the dreaded and invasive English ivy, too, but I know you don't have any of that in your garden, right?

Hookers: Hookers have thorns that help them attach to trees or some other surface. The thorns are not usually enough to get the job done so they need help from us in the form of tying them to the host plant or structure to get them going. Climbing roses are in this group.

Twiners by Leaf Stem: These vines climb using modified leaf stems (aka petioles) that twine around their supports. Most leaf stems are quite short, so these plants need something no bigger than a baby finger to cling to, like wire, string, and twigs

in shrubs and trees. Clematis are in this group, but are pruned differently according to when they bloom—either spring or summer (see below for details).

Twiners by Tendril: A tendril is a leaf stem that has been modified so much that it no longer resembles a leaf stem at all. Each tendril twirls itself around part of whatever the plant is climbing. Examples include sweet peas and passionflower.

Twiners by Growing tip: This group of vines contains the thugs of the vine world, wisteria especially, but also honeysuckle and akebia. The growing tip circles around its support, some in a clockwise direction and others counterclockwise.

What Is a Boss Bud?

Flowering vines will bloom better if they are tied or guided into their supports horizontally (or nearly so). This is because of apical dominance or boss bud syndrome (boss bud is a term coined by Cass Turnbull). The seriously competitive boss bud, the highest bud on a stem, sends a growth-inhibiting hormone down the stem, powered by gravity, to suppress the side growth, resulting in blooms being mainly at the top of the plant. When the vine is tied in horizontally, or nearly so, gravity can't do a good job getting the hormone to the side branches, which allows the side branches to shoot out and bloom. This is especially true for clematis and roses, so aim to get them growing horizontally for more blooms.

Specific Vines

Akebia: Spring-blooming growing-tip twiner. Also known as the chocolate vine because of its delicious chocolaty fragrance, akebia is a shade-tolerant evergreen vine that needs summer pruning to keep it in check, which fortunately is relatively easy. The new vines that crop up after flowering can simply be snapped off with a satisfying pop when they are about a foot or so long—very similar to snapping off suckers on tomatoes. Remove as many as possible. Leaves on old vines can get ugly in summer, so removing some of the older vines as well can improve the appearance of akebia.

Boston Ivy and Virginia Creeper: Clingers with insignificant blooms but fabulous fall color in reds, oranges, and pinks. These two closely related deciduous plants need roomy wall space! Avoid painted wood siding if possible, as they are difficult to get off the wall for painting. Large unpainted wood surfaces and stone, concrete, or brick walls work well. When they get out of hand, pull them off the surface and cut them away.

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Clematis, Spring Blooming: Spring-blooming leaf twiner that has already formed flower buds the previous year. In summer, after the main flush of spring blooms is over, the plant can be cut back by 1/3 – 1/2 to promote new growth and possibly even a few late-season blooms. The only other summer pruning is cutting out dead, ugly, or misbehaving stems.

Clematis, Summer Blooming: Summer-blooming leaf twiner that blooms on new wood. To maximize blooms, avoid cutting these vines in summer. The exception is any vine that is growing where you don't want it or that looks ugly—brown crunchy leaves, black spots, and any other unsightliness. Being vines, they will regrow in a hurry with healthy new leaves and maybe even more flowers.

Climbing Hydrangea: Spring-blooming climber. These graceful plants require little pruning. They can be cut back if needed right after flowering to give them plenty of time to set new flowers. As always, any vine growing where it shouldn't and any dead or spindly stem can simply be gently but firmly pulled away from the surface to which it's attached and cut off.

Generally, however, this is a well-behaved and lovely vine with large white flowers.

Climbing Roses: Summer-blooming climber. Summer pruning of climbing roses primarily consists of picking roses for vases and deadheading blossoms back to a five-part leaf to encourage more flower buds as well as removing errant vines. By the end of August, though, deadheading should stop so the plant can begin to prepare for winter and produce beautiful rose hips (seed pods) for fall color.

Honeysuckle Vines: Summer-blooming growing-tip twiner. This plant is prone to aphids, so hose it off frequently to help control this pest and cut off any badly infested stems throughout the summer. Honeysuckles grow rampantly so, depending on the size of the supporting structure and your tolerance for unbridled growth, cutting away some vines is usually necessary at least once or twice in summer to keep it under control

Passion Flower: Summer-blooming tendril twiner. After the main flush of blooms in early summer, new young whips (growth with no flower buds) quickly gain length. Shorten some whips to 3-4 buds to create flowering spurs and cut all the others off. If the plant seems to lack substance, keep a few whips but wrap them around the existing woody framework to keep everything tidy.

Sweet Peas: Summer-blooming tendril twiner. Summer pruning of this delightful annual vine consists of regular picking and deadheading to encourage more beautiful fragrant blooms and removing any misbehaving or ugly vines.

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Trumpet Vine: Summer-blooming climber. This plant is a strong grower that needs lots of wall or fence space (see Boston ivy/Virginia creeper above). As with other climbers, summer pruning consists of pulling off and cutting away any vines that grow where you don't want them. Keep in mind, though, that even tiny bits of this plant left in the ground will likely grow into new plants.

Wisteria: Spring-blooming growing-tip twiner. This is the queen thug of vines. Cass Turnbull always said that wisteria is Latin for WORK! In summer, multitudes of young 12-foot runners will fling themselves at anything and everything hoping for something to grab onto, including the gutter, the roof, a nearby tree, the basement window, maybe even YOU. Summer pruning is hugely important because the thin tender new runners are removed far more easily than when they have become stiff and woody by winter. Cut off as many of these runners as you possibly can throughout the summer. Up to 90% of the plant should be removed every year. Some vines can be cutback to the main trunk and others leaving five or six nodes to create new flowering spurs. Be diligent!

I wish you the joy of many gorgeous blooms on the vines that embellish your garden to make up for all the work!