



# Gaining Stature *with* Style

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Elevate the beauty of your landscape with formal, rustic, and whimsical supports for garden vines.

BY RITA PELCZAR

**Y**OU MIGHT SAY that vines have no backbone. Their inability to hold themselves upright is the habit that distinguishes them from other garden plants. Left to themselves, vines flop over the ground until they find a purchase to climb, so they can rise above the garden floor and gain some stature.

This lax attitude presents vine growers with the opportunity to fashion distinctive living displays. The challenge goes beyond selecting the right vine, it involves understanding its particular mechanisms for climbing (see “Types of Climbing Apparatus for Vines,” page 26), then finding or creating a support system that accommodates those mechanisms and adds just the right touch—shape, size, color, and attitude—to the garden.

## CONSIDERATIONS

Select a vine and support that will accomplish your purpose within the available space. Is the intent a screen for privacy or a camouflage for an eyesore, or a vertical accent for a bed or container? Perhaps you want to soften the edges of a garage or frame a view. Each purpose will suggest different options both for the type of vine and its support.

Sturdiness is another important consideration. While a lightweight trellis or suspended twine might serve for an annual vine, a woody or perennial vine requires a support that will last for many years. Upkeep



Above: Fast-growing corkscrew vine (*Vigna caracalla*) easily twines up and over an arbor framing a small waterfall. The fragrant clusters of summer flowers open white and age to purple-pink.

Opposite page: The pickets of this fence are too wide for the long, thin petioles of clematis to encircle, but by wrapping its petioles around its own stems, the clematis has succeeded in weaving its way through the support.



The deep green foliage of *Thuja occidentalis* 'Holmstrup' creates a monochromatic backdrop that perfectly sets off the scarlet summer blooms of flame nasturtium (*Tropaeolum speciosum*), whose roots appreciate the shade provided by the evergreen.

## TYPES OF CLIMBING APPARATUS FOR VINES

Although botanists have identified 30 or so types of climbing techniques employed by different vines, the primary concern for gardeners is how they relate to requirements for support. With that in mind, vines can be grouped into four main categories according to their mechanisms of ascent:

**Twiners** wrap their entire stems around a support and grow in a spiraling fashion. Some twiners may need a little assistance getting started. Examples of twining vines include: moonflower (*Ipomoea alba*), mandevilla (*Mandevilla* spp.), cup-and-saucer vine (*Coabea scandens*) and hops (*Humulus lupulus*).

**Graspers** have developed specialized appendages to coil around their support. Passionflowers (*Passiflora* spp.) and sweetpeas (*Lathyrus* spp.) are among the vines that use tendrils—a thin modified leaf or stem—to grasp a support.



Cup-and-saucer vine (*Coabea scandens*) climbs by twining its stems around nearby objects.

Clematis (*Clematis* spp.) and canary flower (*Tropaeolum peregrinum*) grasp with an elongated petiole—leaf stalk—that coils much like a tendril. Supports for graspers need to have struts that are small enough for the tendril or petiole to wrap around.

**Clingers** are surface climbers. They attach themselves using aerial roots or adhesive tips that grow on specialized roots or tendrils. Such vines often climb trees but also grow happily on brick or stone walls. Examples include Boston ivy (*Parthenocissus tricuspidata*) and Virginia creeper (*P. quinquefolia*).

**Clamberers** drape themselves on or through other plants or objects; they may need to be tied to their support to achieve a good appearance. Some clamberers have a weak twining habit. Clambering vines include golden trumpet (*Allamanda cathartica*) and bougainvillea (*Bougainvillea* spp.). —R.P.

should be taken into account: annual vines or perennials that die back to the ground are the best choices for a fence, arbor, or railing that requires periodic painting.

Finally, your support should complement the style of your house and landscape. A rustic wooden trellis reflects the casual charm of a country home while a scrolled metal obelisk or a Victorian arbor better suits a more formal garden.

### BORROWED SUPPORTS

Most landscapes have at least one potential support just waiting for the per-

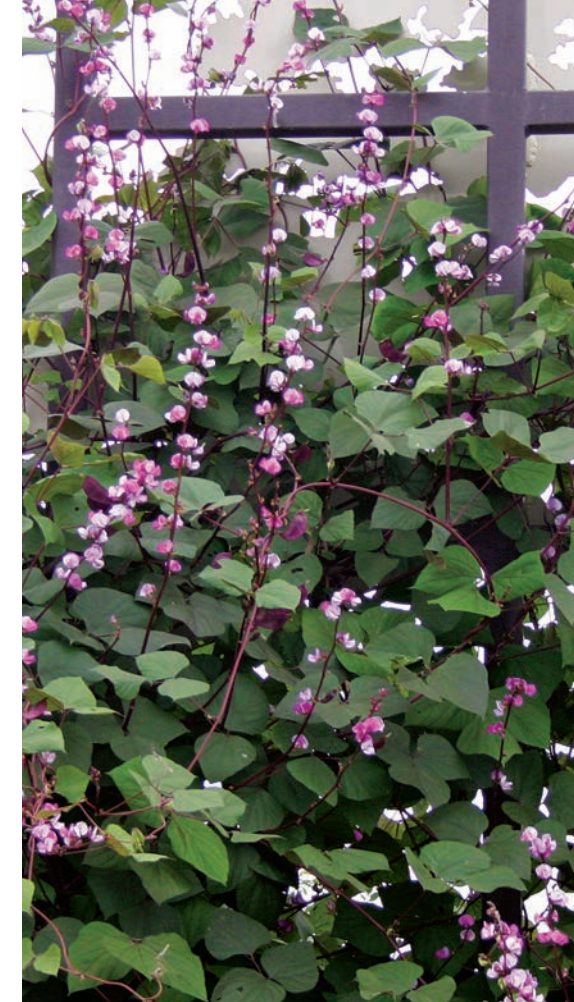
fect vine. A stone or brick wall is a good candidate for Boston ivy (*Parthenocissus tricuspidata*), which clings and climbs with aerial roots. Clambering vines such as ornamental sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*) and golden trumpet (*Allamanda cathartica*) are good subjects for the edge of a retaining wall, where stems cascade downward in response to gravity.

Mailbox posts, lamp posts, gazebo and porch railings, and fences make excellent hosts for twiners, and by selecting vines that reflect the colors used in nearby beds, these structures are integrated into



TOP: LYNNE HARRISON. BOTTOM: JOSH MCCULLOUGH

LEFT: NEIL SODERSTROM. RIGHT: BRINDA MANDELLA



the landscape. Using two complementary vines on a single post can magnify the flower show. A good option for a porch railing is to plant both morning glories and moonflowers; the result is a round-the-clock summer flower display.

Trees or shrubs offer more options for vine support. This arrangement may provide colorful flowering vines with a stunning background of bark or foliage—think of a pale pink clematis growing on a purple smoke tree or ninebark—and it could yield a double flowering season, one for the tree or shrub, another for the vine.

### DEDICATED SUPPORTS

Arbors, trellises, arches, and obelisks designed for the purpose of supporting vines add dramatic vertical accents to the

**Top:** Hyacinth bean (*Labiab purpurea*) is a fast-growing annual that forms a dense, seasonal screen by quickly covering a trellis. Its purple-pink flowers are followed by dark purple pods.


**Left:** Mandevilla, grown on a bamboo support, adds a colorful vertical accent to this container garden, which includes *Plectranthus argentatus* and *Tradescantia pallida*.

**Top right:** Though delicate in appearance, the tenacious tendrils of annual sweetpeas (*Lathyrus odoratus*) support the blossom-laden vine by attaching themselves to a framed mesh support, creating a colorful background for this mixed flower border.

**Bottom right:** A metal rim from an old carriage wheel supports a black-eyed Susan vine (*Thunbergia alata*) on the author's porch, providing a bit of shade and framing the view to the garden beyond.

landscape. These can be purchased in a wide variety of sizes and styles or you can build one to suit your specific requirements. The Internet is loaded with plans.

Repurposed objects can find new life as vine supports, and often add a whimsical touch to the garden. An old bicycle, shutter, wheel rim, or wooden stepladder can be transformed into a delightful scaffold for climbing sweetpeas (*Lathyrus* spp.) or corkscrew vine (*Vigna caracalla*). A window or door frame decked with cup-and-saucer vine (*Cobaea scandens*) or clock vine (*Thunbergia grandiflora*) can define garden spaces or frame a view. A more natural accent can be achieved with a strategically placed piece of driftwood; Mexican flame vine (*Senecio confusus*) or black-eyed Susan vine (*Thunbergia alata*) show off well against the smooth, weathered branches. If you have a bamboo stand, a few stout poles can easily be fashioned into suitable supports as well.

When it comes to a vine and its support, I agree with Aristotle: The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. So get inspired by the examples shown here, then let your creativity loose as you provide a leg up for your favorite garden vine. Onward and upward! 

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*Rita Pelczar is a contributing editor for The American Gardener.*

