



Celastrus scandens

Versatile Vines

Colorful, eye-catching vines can hide architectural flaws, take gardens to new vertical heights and add winter interest. Gardeners are beginning to take note of vines; perhaps you should, too.

By Ann M. Hancock

Why grow vines? The reasons, I think, are threefold. First, many gardeners are traveling to public gardens, both in the United States and abroad. When visiting, they can't help but notice the artful and lavish use of vines in many of these gardens. This translates into a growing market for vines when they return home. Second, as Americans garden more and more intensively, they are discovering that the only way to go — literally — is up. Again, this results in an increased market for climbers. Last but not least, vines are a group of plants that not just everybody grows. It would seem that there is room for a number of producers to meet the growing demand for this 'new' class of plants.

WHAT DOES THE CONSUMER WANT?

He or she wants an easy to grow plant that is lush, colorful and vigorous. It is even better if vines can solve landscaping problems for the client, and they can. (More on that later.) It is an added bonus if it attracts birds. A number of vines are highly attractive to hummingbirds, and perennial vines can also provide nesting habitat for birds. At Michigan State's gardens, mourning doves, house finches and robins have used vines to nest in.

Another bonus is that many vines are not attractive to white tailed deer and serve as deterrents. This benefit should not be underestimated; consumers are very frustrated by

the deer problem, and this particular problem is going to get worse before it gets better.

Where do you, the grower, fit into this picture? If you provide a started, vigorous vine for resale and included proper point of purchase education, a retail nursery center should be able to turn the sale around very quickly.

WHAT VINES SHOULD YOU GROW?

There are a number of very attractive vines, both annual and perennial. Annual species are generally grown from seed, but many consumers would buy started plants if they were available. Each spring here at Michigan State, we sell a number of started seedlings of Hyacinth Bean, our garden's signature plant, and we cannot meet the demand.

The reasons are obvious. The visitors have seen the vines while visiting the gardens. They would like to grow them, but they don't have the growing facilities or the time. This is a key point for the retail center to capitalize on — a point of sale display garden will sell more plants than any praise from the sales staff (though enthusiasm never hurts!).

Because of space limitations, I've chosen to limit my descriptions to perennial vines. The following is a gallery of perennial vines that includes some well-known species, some "old-fashioned" species that were once popular and deserve recognition, and some species that, for whatever reason, are not produced as much and deserve more use. With the

exception of the Climbing Hydrangea, the vines highlighted are not attractive to deer.

PERENNIAL VINES

Actinidia kolomitka, Kolomitka Actinidia. *Kolomitka actinidia* is grown for its spectacular foliage, rather than its fruit. This vine, twining to approximately 15 or more feet in Michigan, has multicolored leaves of green and white, tipped with pink. The flowers are small and hardly visible, unless you make a special point of searching for them. However, they are quite fragrant, which gives an added value to this species. One of the nicest displays I have seen of this vine combined red and white climbing roses weaving in and out of the colorful leaves.

This Actinidia can take partial shade, but does better in a sunny exposure; deep shade will adversely affect coloration. In more southern climates, it would probably thrive in morning sun. Full leaf color is not achieved until the plants are 3-4 years old, and they should be fertilized sparingly for best results. Calcareous soils are said to be optimal for best coloration, but this species tolerates a range of pH and soils. A curious feature of this Actinidia, as well as *Actinidia polygama*, is that cats are said to be attracted to them.

Ampelopsis brevipedunculata, Porcelain Berry Vine. This vine is a member of the grape family, as one glance at its leaves will tell. In the various cultivars, the leaves are a bit more lobed than in the parent species, making them very elegant. The straight species is green, but

the most popular cultivar seems to be the variegated 'Elegans', which has creamy white marbling throughout most of its leaves. The species grows rapidly, climbing by means of tendrils. To me, the most ornamental aspect of this vine is the fruit. Fruit starts out a rather creamy yellow color, later turning into eye-popping shades of turquoise, purple, and finally blue. Often, several colors are present in the same cluster (see photo at right). The purple phase reminds me of the color of Callicarpa fruit, another personal favorite of mine. Birds relish the fruit.

***Aristolochia macrophylla*, Dutchman's Pipe.** Often found shading the porches of older homes, this is a vine whose former popularity deserves to be revived. The leaves are very large, often measuring up to 10 inches across. The growth habit of *Aristolochia macrophylla* is such that the leaves overlap each other like shingles, forming a very private screen.

This vine is a vigorous grower. In a location it likes, where it can twine around a structure, a vine will grow and cover a pergola or lattice screen in one summer. The plant derives its name from its interesting flowers, shaped like a Meerscham pipe. They are a greenish color and hidden beneath the leaves, so it takes a bit of hunting to discover the secret. This is also a vine that will flourish in a shady location as well as in sun. It does require a considerable amount of moisture, however, or it will wilt on hot days. It is not fussy about soil.

***Celastrus scandens*, Bittersweet.** In my opinion, no other ornamental vine has such spectacular fruit. My family used to gather fruited wands of this plant to decorate our Thanksgiving table. These days, the species is protected in many states and such picking is illegal if the plant is growing wild. However, no such prohibition attaches to vines grown in the garden, so people can grow their own bittersweet if they wish to have swags of this handsome ornamental.

Bittersweet can be a rather rampant vine. Some sources state that it seldom exceeds 20 feet; my observation is that it depends on the support the vine finds. I have certainly seen it go higher than 20 feet on telephone poles in my home state of Maine. The foliage stays a handsome glossy green all summer, seems resistant to Japanese beetles and is not attractive to deer. In autumn, it turns a bright gold. After the leaves fall, however, the true glory of this vine is revealed when the brilliant scarlet and orange fruit becomes visible. For those of us in the north, this is something very pleasant to look at during the long bleak months of winter.

This species of bittersweet is a dioecious plant; that is, plants are either male or female, so you must have a male to get fruit on the female. Another similar species, *Celastrus rosthornianus*, is monoecious, but you must still have two different plants to get cross pollination. Bittersweet is very undemanding as far

as soils; in fact, it should be fed only sparingly. Excess nitrogen only encourages rampaging growth. Fruit is borne on second-year wood; pruning to control excess growth should leave at least some older wood so that the fruit is not sacrificed.

***Clematis alpina*, *C. macropetala*: Species Clematis.** Given the "bigger is better" philosophy so often embraced in the world of flower breeding (and life in general), I suppose I understand why these species are not grown more often — but, they deserve to be. *Clematis alpina* and *Clematis macropetala* are among the hardiest of clematis; both are rated zone 3 (hardy to -31° F) by Evison. The individual flowers are not large, but a mature vine in full bloom is a breathtaking sight. If you look at the flowers closely, you will see that they look like columbines without spurs; they are in the same family, so the resemblance is not accidental!

C. alpina is single petaled, and are usually some shade of blue with a contrasting white center, though there are pink forms as well. *Clematis macropetala* is slightly larger, with petals appearing to be doubled; the inner "flower parts" are actually petaloid stamens. Whatever their parts are named, the collective effect is ruffled and charming. These two species are resistant to clematis wilt (*Ascochyta clematidina*), a fungus disease commonly affecting the large-flowered forms of clematis.

Pruning requirements are simply that one wait until just after flowering to prune (if needed). Because of bloom time, an early spring "clean up" will result in the loss of this year's flower buds. In winter, the fruits of clematis are highly ornamental.

***Clematis terniflora*, Sweet Autumn Clematis.** Sweet Autumn Clematis might be even better known if its name didn't change every few years. (I won't tell you how many name changes it's gone through since I first learned it because that would certainly date me!) However, it is a popular vine, as well it deserves to be. Though the flowers are small, they are borne in amazing profusion. A mature vine in full bloom has so many flowers that the foliage is scarcely visible. This clematis is also fragrant, with a scent like vanilla. A fast grower, this would be a good choice for covering an unsightly object such as a chain link fence. The time of bloom is also valuable. *C. terniflora* is in its glory in August and September, when many other plants are not blooming. This is another clematis species which is resistant to clematis wilt. Its one drawback is its vigor, and it should be carefully sited with this in mind.

***Clematis viticella*.** *Clematis viticella* is another species with a number of very attractive cultivars. Some have flowers that are only slightly smaller than the large-flowered hybrids. They are available in a satisfying range of colors — from white through blues, plum and wine colors, and even pink. *C. viticella* also has the advantage of being resistant



Actinidia kolomitka



Ampelopsis brevipedunculata



Clematis macropetala



Polygonum aubertii

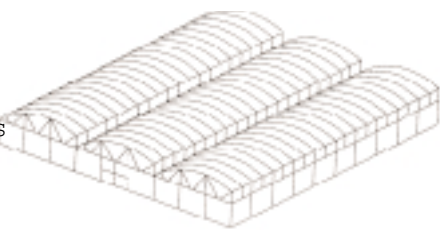
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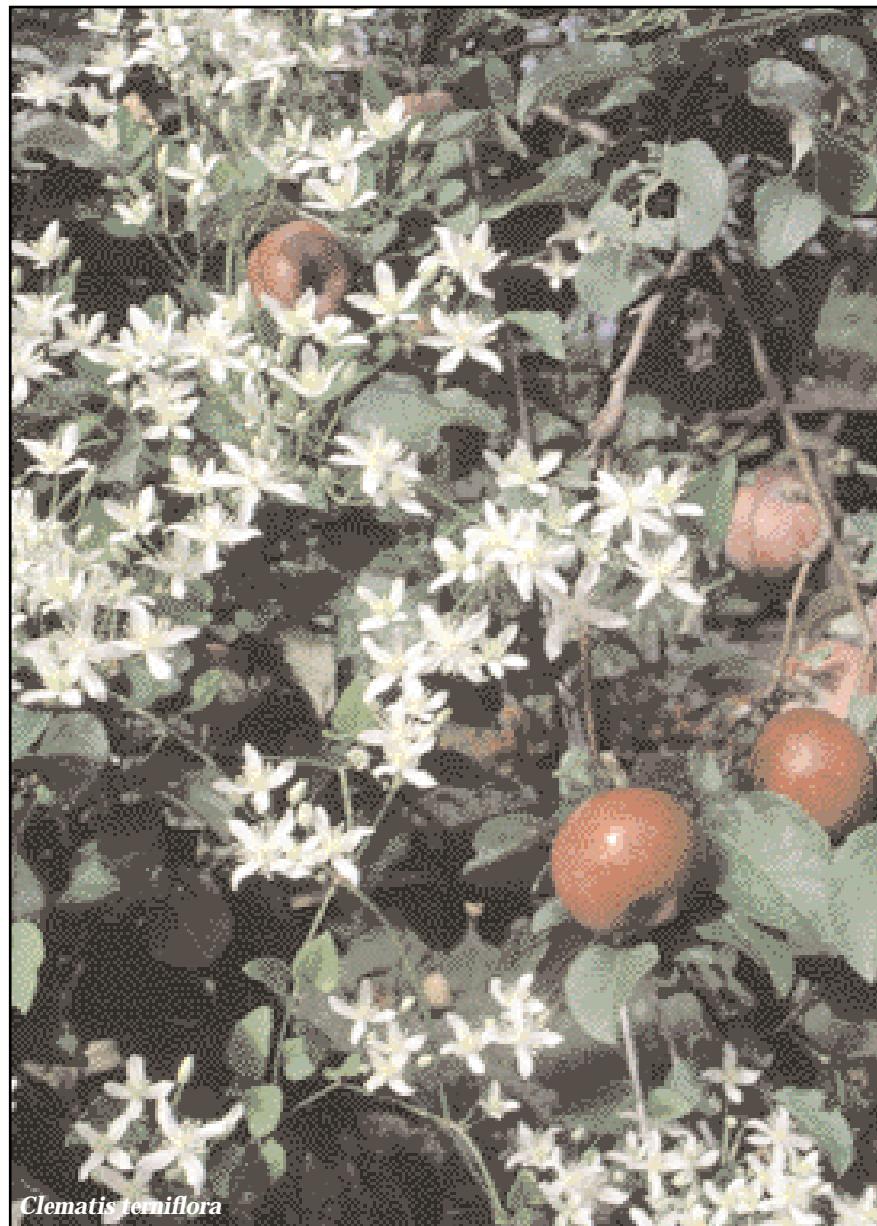
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Clematis terniflora

to clematis wilt. This is one of the easiest of clematis to grow. Its pruning requirements are also very simple, with none of the guesswork involved with other clematis. Simply prune back hard in the spring, down to the first pair of buds.

***Humulus lupulus*, Hops.** Hops have long been famous for their role in flavoring beer, and the female flowers of this vine are an important crop in many regions. However, this vine also has an ornamental role to play, especially the handsome golden-leaved cultivar 'Aurea'. Both green and golden forms are deciduous in Michigan, but the rapid growth of these vines compensates for the dieback and makes them particularly useful for screening purposes. Golden hops is often used in theme yellow gardens in the UK because of its lovely bright color. Other uses I have seen are as a quick cover over a seating area and as a vine for a somewhat shady spot in order to lend a bit of color to an otherwise dark situation.

***Hydrangea anomala ssp petiolaris*, Climbing Hydrangea.** I consider this one of the true aristocrats of the vine world, for it is interesting year round. When the leaves drop, the peeling cinnamon colored bark, coupled with the graceful candelabra-like branching structure bearing the dried flowers, gives those of us in the north some real winter interest. In the spring and summer, the creamy white flowers, like those of its lace cap hydrangea cousins, are highly ornamental. It attaches by means of hold-fasts, so it is not suitable for open structures such as lattice. However, it is in its glory when allowed to climb up a tree or stone wall.

One of the cleverest uses I have observed for this vine was as a hedge along a shady walk, where some interest was needed. The bed was too narrow for effective use of any but the most restrained perennials or annuals. The vine gave both vertical and 3-D interest. I saw this in the summer, but it doubtless was handsome during winter as well. Climbing Hydrangea is not a rapid grower when young; once established, growth rate is moderate. Despite its slow growth, this is a vine well worth waiting for.

***Parthenocissus quinquefolia*, Virginia Creeper.** Virginia Creeper is a

native American vine that is much admired in Europe. It is not a species that has showy flowers; rather, its value lies in its adaptability, its resistance to pests and its autumn color. This past summer, when a plague of Japanese beetles was devouring many types of ornamentals all over campus, Virginia Creeper seemed to be unpalatable to the beetles and was not damaged. In addition, this vine is not attractive to deer!

The real glory of Virginia Creeper comes forth at the end of the summer, as the vine slowly changes into fall color. The scarlet leaves are as bright as the best burning bush at first, then they slowly change into a more somber burgundy color. The fruit, a bluish berry, becomes visible after leaf drop, but does not last long as it is quickly eaten by birds.

***Polygonum aubertii*, Silver Lace Vine.** This vine also has another common name of 'mile-a-minute vine,' from which you can deduce it is a fast climber. Though the vine appears rather twiggy in winter, the summer foliage is handsome and holds up well. This vine is used in several places in the Michigan 4-H Children's Garden, where it grows rapidly to form just the sort of secret hideaways that children love. Unfortunately, another group of visitors to the gardens enjoys it, too. This past summer, Japanese beetles feasted on it voraciously, but the vine came back at the end of the season!

The flowers, which are very lacy as the name implies, are borne over a long period of time, lengthening the ornamental season of the plant. The illustration (see pg. 28) shows the faint pinkish color that some flowers have. Silver Lace Vine is fairly easy to root from older semi-ripe wood; since it also spreads by rhizomes, it is easy to propagate from a piece of rhizome as well. The vine is very adaptable and useful for adverse growing situations.

I hope that the above descriptions have intrigued you and made you think about including vines in your production scheme, or perhaps including some new species to those already in your schedule. While all are not equally easy to produce, they possess many attributes that consumers enjoy. Some have great winter interest (Celastrus, Clematis), some have beautiful flowers (Clematis,

Hydrangea), others have spectacular foliage (Actinidia, Ampelopsis) and some are year round stars, such as Climbing Hydrangea. Each has some unique strength for landscape use, and all are invaluable for adding a third dimension to your customers' landscapes and gardens.

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