

A Greener View: Vine problems

by Jeff_Rugg

Q: We moved into this home a couple of years ago and it had several flowering vines growing on a variety of trellises. Some are falling apart and need to be replaced. I would like to cut some of the vines down, rebuild the trellises and let them grow back. I am afraid the vines will die or, if they survive, will not climb up the trellis. Is it OK to do this now, while they are dormant? How do I attach them to the trellis?

A: Climbing vines want to go up. There are several methods that they use to attach themselves to vertical objects. Vines have long stems that are typically self-supporting for no more than a few feet.

A common method of attachment is through tendrils. This is a thin wire-like appendage that spins around in space as it grows longer. When the spinning tendril hits an object, it wraps around it. Some tendrils have pads on the tip that secrete a glue that sticks to surfaces. Boston ivy, grapes, sweet pea, and Virginia creeper all use tendrils. Clematis uses the leaf stalk as a tendril to wrap around the trellis.

Twining vines have a stem that spirals around looking for support. If you are patient, you can actually watch a twining vine spin. A full revolution takes a couple of hours. These vines will wrap around a small tree, eventually killing it. When the tree is gone the vine can remain if it has more support higher in the tree canopy. Occasionally, you will see the wood of one of these vines used as a unique spiral cane.

Trumpet creeper vine tends to send its shoots in and out of the sun and shade to wrap itself into objects. It can work well on a sturdy lattice-style trellis.

English ivy and climbing hydrangea have aerial rootlets along the length of the stem. They secrete cement that glues the vine to objects, including brick walls, tree bark and other surfaces that other vines can't climb. The rootlets don't penetrate the surface.

The aerial roots and the sticky pads of tendril vines don't damage walls. These vines protect walls from heat and too much moisture. Vines of all kinds are opportunistic and will send shoots into narrow cracks and crevasses. As the vine expands in diameter, the crack may become wider if the surfaces allow. Vines growing on wood, vinyl and other kinds of modular siding can get behind the boards if there is an opening. Don't use these kinds of vines on surfaces that will eventually need to be repainted.

Most vines need sturdy supports. Some vines have small stems that may be pruned regularly for best blooming, such as clematis, and don't need a super sturdy support. Wisteria vines can become incredibly large and heavy. They need a very strong support from the beginning.

As you look at the vine before you cut it down, decide if there are some low branches that can be left to form a well-shaped framework. If not, look for branches that can form a framework as the new vine grows. Spread the side branches out so they can be sent in different directions on the trellis as needed. Don't let twining vines wrap around themselves. They will end up choking themselves to death.

Most vines can easily handle having one-half to two-thirds of the most recent growth cut out. Always remove the normal supply of dead wood that vines create as a normal part of their growth. Many vines bloom best on side shoots that grow horizontally while the leafy shoots grow vertically, so don't cut off too many side shoots.

If the vine blooms in the early spring, wait to prune it and do your trellis work until right after it blooms. It will re-grow quickly and the new growth will set flower buds over the summer and fall for next spring's blooms. If the vine normally blooms in the summer or fall, you can cut it down or prune it in late winter to early spring. These vines bloom on the ends of their new seasonal growth, so all the new growth will be potentially able to produce flowers in the summer or fall.

Vines have many uses and don't have to go on a trellis or a wall. They can be used as a ground cover or grown on a fence. They can also be used to create a screen of a bad view or to frame a vista. There is an old landscape architect saying that doctors bury their mistakes, but architects plant ivy. If you don't like the way something looks, plant a vine to hide it.

As soon as I write an article on vines, I know that I am going to get an e-mail asking about how to get a wisteria to bloom. First, buy one that is already blooming. They tend not to bloom until the vine is mature. Most wisterias are propagated from cuttings. If the cutting is taken from a mature vine, it has a better chance of blooming for you. Otherwise, your vine may not flower until it is more than 10 years old. They bloom on small spur branches on the lateral branches, so don't cut them off.

Being members of the bean family, wisterias have nodes on the roots where bacteria help the vine accumulate nitrogen. Feeding it fertilizer with nitrogen will just make the vine produce more stems and leaves and not flowers. Fertilizing with high phosphate levels may help. Follow the label directions. They also like lots of sun, high soil pH and mulch over the root system.

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