

BY CAROLE OTTESEN

Make use of vertical space in the garden with one or several of these North American vines.

WHEN EVERY inch of the garden is planted and there is no where else to go but up, when there's something unsightly that needs camouflage—like a big, blank garage wall or a telephone pole in front of the house—or when shade is desperately needed, consider planting a vine! Vines do it all. And native vines do it while nourishing wildlife.

Here is a sampling of native vines, selected from my own experience and those of some gardening peers around the United States. Among them are gentle bloomers as well as double-duty vines that bear edible fruits after flowering. It includes innocents whose reputations are tainted by association with exotic invasives, as well as a few that have earned their reputations honestly, but have merit in the right spot.

CAROLINA JESSAMINE
(*Gelsemium sempervirens*)

When Carolina jessamine, also known as Confederate jasmine, (USDA Hardiness Zones 7–9, AHS Heat Zones 10–4), the official flower of South Carolina, starts to bloom, it's a sure sign that winter is over. The fragrant yellow tubular flowers continue into early summer and repeat sporadically thereafter. Its shiny, light green leaves are evergreen in its native range from eastern Virginia and Tennessee south to Florida, the Gulf Coast, and Texas, turning purple in harsh winters.

A twining vine that reaches 10 to 15 feet tall and up to 10 feet wide, Carolina jessamine's smallish size makes it easy to control. Pruning guru Lee Reich, author of *The Pruning Book*, advises pruning "after flowering to get rid of dead and broken stems" then shearing back the remaining growth. Bushy and sprawling, this is the vine to cascade over a wall, festoon a porch railing, or camouflage a chain link fence. Moderately drought tolerant, it thrives in full sun and is adaptable to a wide range of soil types.

Native Vines for American Gardens

Gelsemium sempervirens

Cultivars include 'Pride of Augusta', a double-flowered form, and 'Margarita', a hardy selection that has been grown successfully in USDA Zone 6. All parts of Confederate jasmine are poisonous if ingested.

LEATHER FLOWER, AMERICAN BELLS
(*Clematis viorna*)

Native to stream banks and under tree canopy in the American Southeast to the Midwest and places in the Rockies, (Zones 4–9, 9–1), this gentle climber climbs by tendrils up to 13 feet. It is the poster child of a group of native clematis, lumped together as the "viorna

group." Members of this group are distinguished from other clematis types by the shapes of their flowers—typically urn or bell-shaped—and the restraint of their vines. Their flowers are composed of leathery sepals, fused at the base, that turn up at their tips, varying in color from pale lavender to vivid red-purple. Vines are easy to prune, says Reich—before growth begins, "top all stems back to strong buds within one foot of the ground." Leather flowers produce seeds with long, hairy tails that form showy seed heads.

Similar in appearance to leather flower, *Clematis morefieldii* (Zones 6–8, 8–1) hails

from limey, rocky places in southern Tennessee and northern Alabama where it will climb to 16 feet and bear pretty pink-and-white bells.

Native to scattered locations in moist woodlands in the Southeast and west to Oklahoma, *C. glaucophylla* (Zones 6–8, 8–5) has hot pink flowers that are pumped out nonstop from June to frost, attracting hummingbirds. The flowers and showy seed heads, which appear simultaneously, contrast well with the vine's glaucous, or



Clematis viorna

blue-hued foliage. It grows to 10 or 15 feet in a single season but can be kept shorter by pruning. Provide part shade and regular water during dry spells.

Clematis pitcheri (Zones 5–9, 10–5) grows to 13 feet, bearing pink bells that open to deep cherry from summer into fall. Its native range is from the Midwest to Texas and Arizona where it can be found on limestone outcrops. (For more on American native clematis, view the web special linked to this article on the AHS website).

PASSION FLOWER, MAYPOP
(*Passiflora incarnata*)

The fabulously intricate blooms of our native passion flower, or maypop (Zones 5–10, 12–1) are more than reason enough to grow this vine, but the edible egg-size fruits put it over the top. American naturalist and preservationist John Muir called passion fruits "the most delicious fruit I have ever eaten."

One of the northernmost species in a huge tropical genus, maypop is native from Virginia to Florida and west to southern Illinois, Kansas, and Texas. It thrives in a warm, sunny location in the garden and appreciates winter protection at the northern end of its hardiness range. Passion flower dies to the ground each year, but quickly twines up again in spring, achieving 25 feet in a single season on a trellis or other support. Its rambunctious nature and wide spreading habit—it can spread



Passiflora incarnata

20 feet per year laterally by underground rhizomes—has earned it the reputation of a nuisance in many parts of the South. To avoid its exuberant spread, grow it in a large container. There is a pretty white selection, *P. incarnata* 'Alba.'

GROUNDNUT, POTATO BEAN
(*Apios americana*)

Groundnut (Zones 4–10, 10–3) is an uncommonly cultivated vine with gorgeous and fragrant pink to rusty red blooms—

like very upright wisteria flowers. As pretty as the flowers are, this nitrogen-fixing legume produces edible beans and has long been grown for its tuberous roots. Native Americans ate them and taught the Pilgrims how to dig and cook "Indian potatoes." More nutritious than potatoes, groundnut tubers contain up to 17 percent protein. Wisconsin forager Sam Thayer, author of *The Forager's Harvest* (2006), wrote: "The flowers are fairly good raw or cooked, and the seeds are edible... I have

eaten the young, whitish shoots in the spring both raw and boiled, and have found them passably good but nothing worth raving about."

Groundnut vine grows vigorously to about 15 feet, climbing over shrubs and small trees or sprawling into a dense tangle on the ground. Although the vine dies back in fall, the long chains of tuberous roots can be harvested at any time. Native to the eastern United States, groundnut grows in moist sun to part shade.

CATRIONA T. ERLER

LEFT: JOSEPH G. STRAUCH, JR. RIGHT: JUDYWHITE / GARDENPHOTOS.COM

'ROGER'S RED' CALIFORNIA GRAPE
(*Vitis* spp.)

The aggressive spread and rapid growth of wild grape may cause gardeners to shy away from native grape vines, but California grape (*Vitis californica*, Zones 8–10, 10–8) is considered suitable for domestication by western gardeners.

Californians Betsy Clebsch, author of *A Book of Salvias*, and Bart O'Brien of Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in Claremont, California, recommend 'Roger's Red', a hybrid between California grape and a European wine grape. "It has brilliant red fall color virtually everywhere it's been grown—from the coast to the deserts, and from north to south," says O'Brien. "It produces an abundance of small grapes favored by many birds."

Great on walls, arbors, and chain link fences, it reaches 30 feet in part sun and light shade and has need little water.



Vitis 'Roger's Red'

CORAL OR TRUMPET HONEYSUCKLE
(*Lonicera sempervirens*)

Say "honeysuckle" and for many gardeners the first plant that comes to mind is the dreaded invasive *Lonicera japonica*. Nothing like its aggressive relative, polite coral honeysuckle (Zones 4–9, 9–1) is the classic mailbox adornment. The gray-green leaves are perfoliate—the bases of each pair of opposite leaves are fused around the stem—and they appear on a 10-foot vine that twines counterclockwise around a support. Best in full sun, whorled clusters of tubular coral flowers attract hummingbirds and butterflies. Later, red berries are cherished by finches and robins.

Native from the East Coast west to Texas, it is semi-evergreen in most regions. In the warmer zones, fully evergreen vines flower as early as February and keep on blooming into June. Coral honeysuckle has a host of cultivars, including 'Alba,'

with white flowers; 'Cedar Lane,' sporting deep red flowers and narrow, blue-green leaves; yellow-flowered 'John Clayton' and the highly regarded 'Major Wheeler,' with extremely floriferous coral flowers and reputedly mildew-free foliage.

AMERICAN WISTERIA (*Wisteria frutescens*) and **KENTUCKY WISTERIA** (*W. macrostachys*)

You will never discover a 25-foot-long stem of American wisteria (Zones 5–9, 9–6) snaking around from the side of the house into the front yard as you might with invasive Japanese and Chinese wisterias.

True, the flower clusters of American wisteria grow neither as long and loose nor as fragrant as the Asian species. However, instead of producing its first flowers at 10 years of age or more, American wisteria blooms earlier—typically at four or five, but as early as at one year. It will also flower reliably because it blooms later in the season, in May and June, thereby escaping late frosts. And flowers last longer—up to a month or more—and blooms recur sporadically through summer.

American wisteria also supports wildlife as a host plant for butterflies, including the long-tailed skipper. Perhaps, best of all, it blooms on new growth of the season, making pruning (a mysterious and frustrating practice with exotic wisterias) quite straightforward: Trim your vine to four buds of last year's new growth in early spring before this year's growth begins. After flowering, trim lightly and new shoots will produce a second flush of blooms in summer. Kentucky and American wisterias grow to about 25 feet in full sun or light shade.

Cultivars include 'Amethyst Falls', which is considered to be a dwarf with fragrant lavender flowers, 'Longwood Purple,' with deeper purple flowers, and 'Nivea' with long white racemes. All three are repeat bloomers.

Kentucky wisteria (Zones 6–9, 9–6) from the south central United States has also produced some showy cultivars. Among them is 'Clara Mack,' considered the most restrained of the native wisterias, with fragrant white flower clusters that reach one foot long. 'Blue Moon' is sweetly scented and tends to bloom very early, at two to three years old.

HOW VINES CLIMB

Vines have different ways of supporting themselves, so it's important to know what kind of surface or supporting structure is appropriate when choosing or planting them.

Twining vines coil around their supports in a clockwise or counter-clockwise direction; these vines need a sturdy trellis or network of wires or cables for support. Examples of twiners include groundnut (*Apios americana*), Dutchman's pipe (*Aristolochia* spp.), Carolina jessamine (*Gelsemium sempervirens*), honeysuckles (*Lonicera* spp.), and wisterias.

Tendrils develop specialized leaf stalks that coil where and when necessary. Train tendril climbers such as cross vine (*Bignonia* spp.), clematis, passion flowers (*Passiflora* spp.), and grapes (*Vitis* spp.) to climb on a trellis or arbor.

Self-clinging vines such as Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) and wood vamp (*Decumaria barbara*) have adhesive pads at the end of tendrils, allowing them to climb on the surface of most structures without support. While they won't damage brick or stone, the pads may leave marks on painted wood surfaces.

Clinging stem vines have short, but vigorous adventitious rootlets that can burrow into supports and loop through older stems—they may need initial training to ensure they grow where you intend them to. Provide sturdy support such as a tree trunk or utility pole for these vines, which include trumpet vine (*Campsis* spp.) and climbing euonymus (*Euonymus* spp.).



Dutchman's pipe has twining stems. —C.O.



Wisteria frutescens 'Amethyst Falls'

VIRGIN'S BOWER, WOODBINE
(*Clematis virginiana*)

Often mistaken for the highly invasive sweet autumn clematis (*C. terniflora*), the native virgin's bower (Zones 3–8, 8–3) "adapts beautifully to garden conditions in almost any situation, provided it has sufficient moisture and light," says Neil Diboll, chief executive officer

of Prairie Nursery in Westfield, Wisconsin. According to Diboll, the vine is "notable for its seeds rather than its flowers. Profuse clusters of white blooms are upstaged by the silky silver seed heads in early fall." The deep green foliage looks great all season.

Native to most of eastern North America west of the Rocky Mountains, virgin's

bower reaches 20 feet tall. Cut it back to the ground each year and grow it up arbors, lamp posts, and pergolas.

AMERICAN BITTERSWEET
(*Celastrus scandens*)

American bittersweet (Zones 3–8, 8–1) is another vine with an invasive relative, Asian bittersweet (*C. orbiculatus*). Native to a broad range encompassing most of eastern North America, American bittersweet is attractive to songbirds because of its decorative fall fruits. "The leaves fall off with the first hard frosts, leaving the tawny stems adorned with the brilliant red-orange, pea-sized seeds," says Diboll. He advises cutting the vines in long sections when the seeds are ripe and using them to make decorations for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Because American bittersweet is dioecious, meaning male and female flowers are borne on separate plants, it's important to plant several vines if you want to ensure a supply of the fruits. Plant it in part shade to full sun with support of a trellis, or allow it to clamber over early-blooming shrubs. Diboll says that although the vine can sometimes produce a dense cover on shrubs, it does not smother them.

PIPEVINES (*Aristolochia* spp.)

Butterfly gardeners count on pipevine or Dutchman's pipe (*Aristolochia macrophylla*)

SAXON HOLT

SUSAN A. ROTH (2)



Celastrus scandens

la, Zones 5–8, 8–4) and its fuzzy-leaved cousin woolly pipevine (*A. tomentosa*, Zones 5–9, 9–3) as larval food sources for the pipevine swallowtail butterfly. Dutchman's pipe is a hardy, vigorous, East Coast native which when given a site in sun or part shade and moist soil, will quickly grow to 30 feet. Its small, purplish brown flowers—which bear a resemblance to the curved, Calabash-style pipes that fictional sleuth Sherlock Holmes is often portrayed with—appear in early to midsummer. They are carried on old growth, so do not cut the vine back in fall.

While the flowers are enchanting (although some people consider their odor

foul), it is the huge, overlapping heart-shaped leaves—eight inches or more across—that endear this vine to gardeners. Because pipevines grow from fleshy roots or rhizomes, they are best transplanted while dormant.

Woolly pipevine is native from the Midwest, south to Texas and Florida. It has slightly larger flowers than Dutchman's pipe but also grows up to 30 feet. Western gardeners can try California or Sierra pipevine (*A. californica*, Zones 7–9, 8–4), a northern California native that grows 10 to 12 feet tall. Its creamy, two-inch diameter flowers are highlighted by bright red markings.

Sources

Forestfarm, Williams, OR. (541) 846-7269. www.forestfarm.com.

Nearly Native Nursery, Fayetteville, GA. (770) 460-6284.

www.nearlynativenursery.com.

Oikos Tree Crops, Kalamazoo, MI. (269) 624-6233. www.oikostreecrops.com.

Sunlight Gardens, Andersonville, TN. (800) 272-7396. www.sunlightgardens.com.

Wilkerson Mill Gardens, Chattahoochee Hills, GA. (770) 463-2400.

www.hydrangea.com.

Woodlanders, Inc., Aiken, SC. (803) 648-7522. www.woodlanders.net.

Resources

Armitage's Vines and Climbers by Allan M. Armitage. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 2010.

Flowering Vines: Beautiful Climbers edited by Karan Davis Cutler. Part of the 21st-Century Gardening Series from Brooklyn Botanic Garden, New York, New York, 1999.

CROSS VINE (*Bignonia capreolata* syn. *Anisostichus capreolata*)

Cross vine (Zones 6–9, 9–5) is a favorite of garden writer Jan Midgley of Birmingham, Alabama. Midgley, author of *Southern Wildflowers*, especially appreciates its accommodating nature. “It will grow in part shade or full sun, in average moisture or on a rock outcrop. It is great for covering ugly cement walls. If shade grown, it should have a half day of sun in order to get bloom at a level where one can enjoy the show.”

The showy, fragrant flowers—stunning two-tone red and yellow trumpets that attract hummingbirds—appear in May and June. Cross vine's native range is southern Ontario and the entire eastern United States. Its compound leaves are fully evergreen in the southern part of its range, but the vine may die to the ground over winter in the north.

Midgley has seen cross vine used “effectively around light poles in an upscale shopping center in Birmingham.” Let “light poles” serve as the caveat here. Cross vine can climb by tendrils to 50 feet if given half a chance, and it is known to spread underground where conditions are to its liking. Give it something to hold onto to get it started and then stand back; it can be cut back hard if it outgrows its support structure. The cultivar ‘Tangerine Beauty’ is orange-red with a golden throat.

MORE NATIVE VINES TO CONSIDER

Botanical name (Common name)	Type	Height/Spread (feet)	Ornamental features/ Site requirements	Native range	USDA Hardiness, AHS Heat Zones
<i>Adlumia fungosa</i> (Allegheny fleece vine)	biennial twiner	8–12/2–3	Clusters of pink flowers in late summer/shady site with support	Canada south to North Carolina	3–7, 7–3
<i>Asarina antirrhiniflora</i> (climbing snapdragon)	annual twiner	6–8/2–3	Tubular pink to purple flowers in summer/full sun, trellis or fencing	Texas, Southwest	9–12, 12–1
<i>Cocculus carolinus</i> (moralbeads)	perennial twiner	12/2–3	Pale green flowers in summer, red fruits in fall/part shade to shade	eastern U.S.	5–9, 9–5
<i>Decumaria barbara</i> (wood vamp)	perennial self-clinger	15–25/2–4	Glossy green foliage, creamy white flowers in late spring/site in part shade, provide support	southeastern U.S.	6–9, 9–6
<i>Lonicera ciliosa</i> (orange honeysuckle)	perennial twiner	5–15/2–4	blue-green foliage and orange flowers late spring into summer/part shade, water in dry periods	British Columbia south to northern California	5–8, 8–5
<i>Menispermum canadense</i> (moonseed)	perennial twiner	10–15/2–5	pale green flowers in mid- to late summer, followed by black fruits*/ part shade to shade	eastern U.S.	5–8, 8–5

*The clustered fruits, which resemble grapes, are poisonous, so this is not a good choice for a garden frequented by children.



Bignonia capreolata
'Tangerine Beauty'

VIRGINIA CREEPER (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*)

Virginia creeper (Zones 3–10, 9–1) is a deciduous vine that grows in the wild throughout the eastern United States and south to Mexico. It usually grows to about 25 feet, but has been known to reach as much as 75 feet.

It climbs and holds on by little disks at the end of short tendrils. These holdfasts, unlike those of trumpet vine and ivy (*Hedera* spp.), are not harmful to masonry but will disfigure the finish of painted wood. Its green palmate leaves turn red in the fall.

Insignificant greenish-white summer flowers give way to clusters of dark berries that are eagerly eaten by many birds.

While some gardeners will shudder at the idea of planting Virginia creeper, it has merit in the shady part of a naturalistic garden where few other vines will flourish. Leaves of the cultivar ‘Monham’ (Star Showers®) sport irregular splashes of white, and in cool weather, a lovely pink blush.

TRUMPET VINE (*Campsis radicans*) Some admire the red-orange flowers of trumpet vine (Zones 3–9, 9–3) and the

hummingbirds that visit them; others consider this vine an invasive thug. No matter which view you hold, keeping this southeastern United States native from becoming a 40-foot monster takes tough love. Rather than pruning the vigorous stems, cloaked in dark green compound leaves, Reich suggests just “whacking it back.”

Because it tends to send up root suckers in all directions, plant it where it cannot reach what you don't want engulfed. Some possible locations for trumpet vine are at the base of a very large, dead tree surrounded by mowed lawn or on a chain link fence in an area where its spread will be limited by hardscaping.

Its spectacular show of midsummer tubular flowers attract swarms of hummingbirds. Cultivars provide a range of flower colors: ‘Jersey Peach’ is a lovely pale peach, ‘Atropurpurea’ is a wonderful deep rose, and ‘Flava’ is a soft yellow.

Every garden has at least one unsightly problem spot. If you camouflage it with a native vine, enjoying more wildlife will be part of the bargain. Just be sure to match the vigor of the vine you choose to the location and the size of the problem.

A contributing writer for The American Gardener, Carole Ottesen gardens in Maryland and Nova Scotia. Her latest book, Dying for the Christmas Rose, a garden mystery, was published this spring.