Growing Vertical with Vines

Perennial vines are too often overlooked as a landscape plant. This is unfortunate since vines can add vertical interest to any yard. Many offer attractive flowers, or will draw attention with their notable fruit or foliage. Most vines are fast growing and low maintenance making them a great choice if you are looking to provide shade or privacy to a deck or a space in the backyard.

Vines are plants that adapted to woodland life by climbing or creeping their way into sunlight. Most vines climb or creep by winding their stems around a structure they use as a support. These are called twining vines and include honeysuckle and American bittersweet. Some vines, like grapes, coil tendrils around support structures they encounter. While others, called clinging vines, adhere to a support using suction cups or small root-like discs located on their tendrils. These ‘holdfasts’ allow the vine to cling tightly to structures like buildings or trees. The Virginia creeper is an example of a clinging vine. You may find that these types of vines are reluctant to let go if you choose to remove them from their support.

To select a vine that will work best for you first consider its intended use. Also, think about the location for the vine. What are its soil and light requirements? Lastly, what type of support will the vine need? Twining and tendril-type vines climb well on wires, trellises and arbors. Clinging vines can attach to rough-textured surfaces like brick or stone without any support. Because these vines hug so closely to a wall, avoid letting them grow directly on framed structures. They can hold moisture and cause wood rot. Instead, you might grow a clinging vine on a trellis that is kept far enough away from the wall to allow for good air circulation between the wall and the vine.

During the first year, as the plant is getting established, growth may be small but will become more vigorous in following years. There’s an old saying that applies to perennial vines, “first year sleep, second year creep and third year leap.” If training a twining vine, be sure to get it going in the correct direction. All twining vines, except for honeysuckle, wind up and around a support from left to right. Honeysuckles will twist around right to left. Vines usually need yearly pruning to remove any dead or damaged branches or to limit growth.
There are several perennial vines that do well in Iowa. The Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) is native to Iowa and can be found growing in woodlands throughout the state. It grows in sun or shade and can reach up to 50 feet in height. This vine offers a beautiful display of fall color when the leaves turn a brilliant reddish-purple. During the fall, it also produces smallish, dark berries that provide food for birds.

American bittersweet (*Celastrus scandens*) is another native vine. Its claim to fame is the bright orange and yellow berries that add festive fall color to the yard. American bittersweet is dioecious so a male and female plant is needed for fruit set. The berries are sometimes collected for ornaments and decoration. It likes full sun but tolerates partial shade. This is a fast growing vine and can reach up to 20 to 30 feet.

If you want to attract wildlife to your yard, plant some wild grape (*Vitis* spp.). Its fruit is edible and, depending on the variety, can be purple, red or white. Wild grape sets fruit in late summer or early fall. Nearly 100 different species of birds and mammals are known to eat the grapes. It can reach a height of up to 30 feet.

For a vine that hummingbirds like there is the trumpet creeper (*Campsis radicans*). It produces clusters of trumpet-shaped flowers. Blossoms are orange to red and will attract hummingbirds as well as other pollinators. Plant this clinging vine in a sunny spot. It tolerates a wide range of soil types and can grow to about 30 feet. The trumpet creeper can get invasive, however, so may need regular pruning to control its growth.

The last one I want to mention is the climbing hydrangea (*Hydrangea anomala petiolaris*). This is a lesser known vine that tends to be underused. It likes to be shaded so plant it in part or full shade. It can reach 50 feet in height and produces large, white, fragrant flowers that bloom above a background a dark green leaves. In the fall the leaves turn yellow and it offers winter appeal with its cinnamon colored bark. This is a clinging vine that is slow to establish. Plant it in moist, well-drained soils.

If you have any questions, please feel free to email me at mmurphy@iastate.edu, or phone (712) 472-2576 or contact your local County Extension office.

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