

DESIGN & DECORATING

A Marriage of True Vines

Climbers can really get a garden off the ground—especially if you boldly intertwine two (or more) varieties for a lush tapestry

BY LINDSEY TAYLOR

VERTICAL GARDENS, like those created by French botanist Patrick Blanc, have inspired countless imitations, but the frenzy for verdant walls may finally be plateauing as people realize the level of upkeep and money such gardens require. That doesn't mean gardeners aren't still craving verticality. Covering walls, fences and other up-thrusting structures like pergolas or tuteurs (tall, conical or pyramidal frames) with plants adds rhythm and interest to a garden—not to mention more growing space, especially welcome in smaller plots.

The easiest way to become upwardly green is the clever use of vines and climbers, including twiners like the passionflower or kiwi vine, whose tendrils and branches need a support to wrap themselves around; self-clingers like climbing hydrangea that will adhere unaided to most vertical surfaces; and ramblers (typically roses) that just need a little support to scramble up and over a structure. Each type has its merits, but the real artistry comes into play when you mix two or more varieties.

Arranging a marriage of vines with similar needs and habits sounds harder than it is. Unlike European gardeners, who view any vertical surface as a blank canvas, Americans seem to venture into the world of climbers with trepidation, often ending up with a single lonely vine straggling across a wall or fence, tentative and unlush. Achieving a rich tapestry of multiple types is just a question of doing your homework and learning how to control the vines.

George Schoellkopf of Hollister House, an impressive garden in Washington, Conn., is like a mixologist of plants. A Texas native who's spent years perfecting his ever-evolving landscape, Mr. Schoellkopf is a fan of climbers and is brilliant at pairing like-minded partners. "Knowing a plant's habits is important," he said. "Is it an aggressive grower or slow and delicate? What growing conditions does it like?" Doing a little research up front to find plants with simpatoco needs goes a long way toward ensuring you don't waste money or create an unmanageable mess. Even so, some pruning is often unavoidable. "It's important to find the balance between the wall and the climbing plants," said Mr. Schoellkopf. "You need to control their growth so they don't just take over, especially when you are working with a rapid grower."

At Hollister House, Mr. Schoellkopf particularly likes to mix different varieties of the hardy evergreen euonymus, which he calls "God's gift to the north." (Note: In zones 6 and northward, euonymus vine is not the invasive problem it can be in warmer climates.) Favorite types include *Euonymus fortunei* 'Variegatus,' with its almost white leaves ("It plays a trick on the eye—from a distance it reads as a wall covered in white flowers," he said) and the tiny leafed *Euonymus fortunei* 'Kewensis.' On the back wall of the house, Mr. Schoellkopf combined *Rosa* 'Eden,' a climbing rose that's a repeat bloomer, with a mix of three different *Euonymus* for an interesting patterning of leaf and flower.

The world of vines, of course, is vast and potentially overwhelming. There are vines for shade, for sun, for



CLING THEORY Clockwise from above: Climbing hydrangea mixed with two types of *Euonymus fortunei* at Hollister House in Connecticut; another pairing at Hollister House; a clematis vine gets friendly with a climbing rose, a popular coupling.



foliage alone, for flowers. There are evergreen vines, ones that will cover a structure rapidly and those that take the slow approach. And then there are vines you should beware of due to their aggressively invasive nature: Wisteria and trumpet vine, for instance, can do a number on foundations if planted close to a house; kudzu and Japanese honeysuckle are choking parts of the South.

If you're too impatient or risk-averse to experiment with untried mixes, consider the classic combination of climbing-rose and clematis, a common sight in Europe. Dan Long, founder of Brushwood Nursery (gardenvines.com) in Athens, Ga., finds the two combine beautifully, having similar requirements for soil, water and light. It should be mentioned that Mr. Long, who's been growing vines for mail-order sale since 1998, is determined to raise the profile of clematis in America (where it's often dismissed as a "mailbox vine").

A clematis planted at the base of a rose, about a foot away, will weave its way through the rose vines, typically blooming when the rose's own petals have faded. (If your rose is a single bloomer, this really helps keep your vine wall or structure vivid.) It's just a question of taking the idea of choosing plants that will bloom in sequence and applying it vertically.

'Interweaving vines is all about pacing and mixing, knowing your plants and then letting loose a little.'

Louis Bauer, director of horticulture at Wave Hill, a jewel box of a New York City public garden in the Bronx, recommends a related formula: Mixing two (or more) types of clematis with different bloom times. Clematis is often a good choice for nervous gardeners, said Mr. Bauer: "Choosing ones such as *Clematis crispa* and *Clematis vitorna* that die back to the ground [in northern climes] takes the fear of pruning out of the equation."

If your vertical surface is in a shady spot, choose vines that aren't too ravenous for sun. Mr. Long is a fan of the self-clinger *Parthenocissus henryana*, a less aggressive, variegated version of Virginia creeper that pairs particularly well with climbing Japanese hydrangea 'Moonlight' (*Schizophragma hydrangeoides*). When it comes to a part-shade wall, Mr. Schoellkopf also recommends a climbing hydrangea, but likes to mix it with the variegated kiwi vine (*Actinidia kolomikta*), whose green leaves develop pink and white tips, for a dense, interesting pairing.

"Height in the garden is important," said Page Dickey, owner of a charming Connecticut garden called Duck Hill. She grows vines "religiously" on everything from low stone walls to pergolas in the vegetable gardens, and has even found a way to work truly impressive height into the mix: by training climbers to wind around the trunks of trees. "I grow Japanese hydrangea up some of my shade trees, or a rambler rose up an old apple tree," she said, "so when the tree's flowers fade and before the apples come, you have beautiful blooms. It's all about pacing and mixing, knowing your plants and then letting loose a little."