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 horticulturist Patrick Blanc, have inspired countless imitations, but the frenzy for ventral walls may finally be subsiding 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 railings (full, concave 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 to choose one of the many climbers, including twiners like the passionflower and liana vine, whose tendrils and branches need a support to wrap themselves around; self-clinging climbing hydrangea (Hydrangea anomala subsp. petiolaris) 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 hesitation, often ending up with a single lonely vine struggling across a wall or fence, tentative and unsightly. Achieving a rich tapestry of multiple types is just a question of doing your homework and learning how to control the vines.

George Schodorf of Blithewold House, an impressive garden in Warren, R.I., is like a minefield of plants. A Texas native who’s spent years perfecting his ever-evolving landscape, Mr. Schodorf 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 similar needs gives 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. Schodorf. “You need to control their growth as they don’t just take over, so be picky when you are working with a rapid grower.”

At Blithewold House, Mr. Schodorf particularly likes to mix different varieties of the hardy evergreen support, which he calls “God’s gift to the north.” Despite its name, it’s not fussy about shade or humidity, and nor is the invasive problem it can be in warmer climates. Favorite varieties include Eucryphia corynantha ‘Variegata,’ with its almost white leaves, a true evergreen. “Eucryphia corynantha ‘Variegata’ with its almost white leaves is my favorite for a trilby on the top of a distance it needs to be enclosed in white flowers,” he said, and the tiny-leaved Eucryphia corynantha ‘Rosealis’ on the back wall of the house. Mr. Schodorf combined these three: a climbing rose that’s a repeat bloomer, with a mix of three different Eucryphias for an interesting pattern of leaf and flower.

The world of vines, of course, is vast and potentially overwhelming. There are vines for shade, for sun, for 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 unruly vines, consider the classic combination of climbing rose and clematis, a common sight in Europe. Dan Long, founder of Bridlewood Nursery (gardening.com) in Alabama, says, “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 1996, is determined to raise the profile of clematis in America where it’s often dismissed as a ‘redneck 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 well 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 Racine, director of horticulture at Wave Hill, a jewel box of a New York City public garden in the Bronx, recommends a related formula: Mix two (or more) types of climbers with blooming vines. Clematis is a good choice for narrow gardens, said Mr. Racine. “Climbing vines such as Clematis montana and Clematis montana var. texensis that go back to the ground (in northern climates) takes the fun out of pruning out of the equation.”

If your vertical surface is a shady spot, choose vines that aren’t too voracious for sun. Mr. Long is a fan of the self-clinging Parthenocissus henryana, a less aggressive, variegated version of Virginia creeper that pairs particularly well with climbing Japanese hydrangea’s “Moonlight” (Schizophragma hydrangeoides). When it comes to a parti-shade wall, Mr. Schodorf also recommends a climbing hydrangea, but likes to mix it with the variegated box vine (Arctostaphylos), whose green leaves develop pink and white tips for a dense, interesting pattern.

“Height is the garden’s importance,” said Liz Dickey, owner of a charming Connecticut garden called Buck Hill. She grows vines “religiously” on everything from low stone walls to pergolas in the vegetable garden, and has even found a way to work truly impressive height into the mix by training climbers to wade among the trees. “Grow Japanese hydrangeas up some of my shade trees, or a rambling rose up on an apple tree,” she said. “So when the trunks are bare and before the apples come, you have beneficial blooms. It’s all about pacing and mixing, knowing your plants and then letting loose a little.”

CLING THEOIDY Clockwise from above: Climbing hydrangeas mixed with two types of Euonymus fortunei and peony; Hailstone House in Connecticut; another pairing at Hailstone House, a clematis vine gets friendly with a climbing vine, a popular coupling.