



Pruning Climbing Vines

Climbing vines are planted for their beautiful flowers and, depending on species, their fruit. They are used as a covering for walls, arbors, and trellises. Vines require minimal management, are generally resistant to pests, and, with regular pruning, will produce quality foliage and flowers. But if climbing vines are left unmanaged over many years, they will grow out of bounds, become unattractive, harbor wasps and birds, collect trash, and damage building mortar joints and siding. Over time, flowers and foliage quality can also decline when vines are neglected.

Vines grown for their flowers and fruit that are planted and pruned similarly include grapes (*Vitis* spp.), trumpet creeper (*Campsis radicans*), wisteria (*Wisteria* spp.), bittersweet (*Celastrus* spp.), and honeysuckle (*Lonicera* spp.). Vines grown for foliage include wintercreeper (*Euonymus* spp.), Boston ivy (*Parthenocissus tricuspidata*), and English ivy (*Hedera* spp.).

When possible, vines should be pruned annually. In southern Illinois, pruning is best done in the early spring from late February to March. Shoots that grew in the previous year (one-year-old canes) will produce flowers and fruit (seed) during the coming growing season (an exception is fall-blooming clematis).

When pruning, leave enough blooming canes to cover and correspond with the wires, arbor, trellis, or support structure and remove the rest. For mature grape vines on a simple two-wire trellis, cut back selected one-year-old canes to short “spurs” from 6 to 12 inches in length. Keep five to six or more spurs, depending on age of the vine. Excess canes should be removed as close to the trunk and permanent branches as possible. Alternatively, select three to six new

canes that originate close to the trunk and cut them longer, 4 to 6 feet, and tie these canes to the support structure. In all, about 6 to 8 feet of last year’s growth should be kept and all else pruned away.

Depending on the arbor or trellis, more permanent branches or “arms” are often left to outline the supporting structure. Thus, a simple approach to pruning is to cut back all new shoots originating from older canes to 6- to 12-inch length spurs throughout the structure. Again, the goal is to reduce last year’s wood so that flowers are improved and the vine is not “over-cropped.” This approach also leaves flowering spurs scattered throughout the support structure.

For vines against walls, such as non-flowering ivy, one approach is to create a multi-stemmed stump from which new canes are generated annually. At pruning time, simply cut all the vines to 6- to 12-inch stubs. In general, depending on the wall area to be covered each year, five to six 12-inch canes are sufficient. Depending on the structure, ivy is often left to permanently cover the surface. In this case, only limited pruning is done to keep it away from windows and prevent it from creeping under eaves and siding, where expanding vines can cause damage.

Clematis (*Clematis* spp.) is a delicate and difficult flowering vine to grow, and it requires a different pruning approach. Clematis species are divided into two basic flowering groups: spring/summer blooming and fall blooming. Many spring-blooming cultivars will also bloom lightly in the fall. These include such large-flowered types as ‘Nelly Moser,’ ‘Barbara Jackman,’ and many new cultivars commonly found in chain-store garden centers. The fall-blooming species is a better arbor and trellis plant because of its

rapid growth. Gardeners in Illinois are most familiar with ‘Sweet Autumn Clematis’ in this class.

When pruning clematis, we need to know where flowers originate from, either from the previous season’s wood or that of the current year. For types flowering in the spring/summer, the flowers will originate from large buds set the previous year. Thus, heavy winter or early spring pruning should be avoided or flowers will be removed. For the fall flowering types, hard pruning in the spring will not affect flowers that form later on new growth. But, depending on the degree of hard pruning, time to flowering can be delayed. So, a portion of the vines should not be cut back too harshly. When this vigorous type outgrows its support in late summer, it should not be topped or flowers will be lost.

A simple pruning approach for clematis is to remove dead stems, seed heads, and weaker vines; thin, congested growth; or keep a vine in bounds to its trellis. Prune immediately after the plant has bloomed.

A Detailed Approach to Pruning Clematis

More specific pruning can increase clematis flower size and quality. The spring/summer blooming types can be lightly pruned in the early spring just before growth begins. Because some cultivars are not reliably hardy beyond USDA Zone 6, the first step will be to trim back any winter-killed stems. To check the extent of winter damage, scratch the vine to look for bright green tissue below, and squeeze buds to determine if they are alive. Winter damage usually occurs toward the ends of the vine. Remove any dead growth to a pair of healthy buds. Thin excess live growth by selectively trimming the vine mass, removing only the more spindly canes. Remember, over-pruning of live vines will reduce flower number, but limited thinning can improve flower size on existing canes. Vigor of the vine and the degree of

winter kill, if any, are primary determining factors in how much the vine should be thinned. Depending on the cultivar, a late flush of bloom can also occur in the fall. After the main early bloom, trim back spent bloom stems and bring the vine into control on the support trellis by heading back vines and thinning if the vine mass is still thick. Lightly fertilize and water to encourage new growth.

For fall-blooming clematis, the previous season’s growth can be cut back hard in varying degrees in the early spring. For larger plants, leave various lengths of cane to put flowers in different positions later in the year. Blooms may occur earlier on longer, less severely trimmed canes. Following spring pruning, vines should be left alone and allowed to grow. By mid-July, they will have developed a large mass of vines, and they can over-grow, with one vine on top of the other. If desired, this mass of vine can be thinned to reduce volume, but tip-growth should not be uniformly headed back, or all flowers will be lost for the season. When thinning, prune vines like you would spring/summer clematis, reducing the mass through selective trimming to main and lateral branches. Thinning the vines in July will improve flower number and size when they bloom later in the fall. Summer thinning also exposes the dark green of underlying foliage.

For both types of clematis, adequate fertilization and site preparation are important. Choose a well-drained site or make a slight mound to enhance drainage. Clematis responds to a neutral soil pH (7.0), so add lime to the planting site to reduce soil acidity. Bone meal or another form of phosphorus should also be worked into the planting area. Early in the spring, a cup of general purpose fertilizer (10-10-10) should be evenly scattered over the soil in a 2-foot radius around the plant and lightly worked in. Set plants slightly deeper in the soil than they were in the pot to encourage more stem growth. Avoid setting plants higher than their previous soil line.

Vines for Landscaping (publication #U5034) is an excellent bulletin that you can order through your local U of I Extension office.



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