PLANT LIFE COLUMN

VINES

Spring is not quite here, but the heat is. The combination of heat and drought make it tough for plants. Rains and cooler weather this weekend could be a pleasant relief if we don’t get severe weather along with it. I have put in a request for a gentle drizzle.

Knowing that the heat will only worsen as we move through spring, summer and fall, consider your options for reducing the impacts of our generous supply of solar heating most of the year. Vines are a popular landscape component that can provide shade to cool you, your home and your landscape.

Grow climbing vines on a trellis to shade walls or grow them on an overhead arbor to provide shade for a seating area. For the best cooling effect, shade windows and walls on the east and west sides of the home.

Vines provide living walls which intercept solar energy and at the same time cool the surrounding air with a natural evaporative cooling mechanism called transpiration. Water moves from the soil to the leaves inside the plant. Water vapor is released through small pores on the leaves called stomates. Evaporation of water vapor cools the air much like you might observe a cooling effect from walking through the mist tents at local area attractions.

Transpiration increases humidity and high humidity is ideal for growth of mold and mildew, so you don’t want plants on the walls of your house. Instead, plant vines (and shrubs) away from the house to allow for good air movement next to the walls.

Vines climb by twining, winding or clinging. The type of growth determines what type of structural support is needed.

Winding vines have tendrils or claw like growths on the stems with grab and hold onto supports. Painted trumpet, (Clytostoma callistegiodes), and virginia creeper, (Parthenocissus quinquefolia), are examples of winding vines.

Flame vines, (Pyrostegia venusta), are providing a splash of bold color in tree tops throughout the county during our winter season. These are one of the most spectacular winding vines. Look for a blanket of blazing orange blooms in the top of pines or other trees as you drive around town.

Painted trumpet flowers are are about 5 inch across and lavender with purple streaks. Purple passionflower is a recommended winding vine popular in butterfly gardens. A showy red form is also available.

Muscadine grapes, (Vitis rotundifolia), a favorite with Southerners, produce distinctly flavored fruits. Some require cross pollination for good fruit set. If you are not wild about their taste, they are a good wildlife food.

Clingers grasp surfaces with special rootlets or adhesive discs. They commonly grow on block or brick fences or up tree trunks. English ivy, (Hedera helix), heartleaf philodendron, (Philodendron scandens), devil’s ivy, (Epipremnum aureum), and climbing fig, (Ficus pumila), are examples. Climbing fig gives the local medieval castle its charm. Unfortunately, roots may loosen mortar between blocks and bricks. They are not recommended for wood fences or walls since they increase the rate of decay.

Twining vines grow vertically by encircling upright supports. Use poles, wires or lattice to support this type of vine. Examples include the pink flowered mandevilla, (Mandevilla splendens), confederate jasmine, (Trachelospermum jasminoides), pipe vine (Aristolochia elegans), yellow allamanda, (Alamanda cathartica), purple allamanda, (Allamanda violacea), and bougainvillea, (Bougainvillea spp.). Pipe vines have flowers
shaped like a pipe with a large flared bowl which is marked in a calico pattern. The vines are food for larval butterflies so gardeners tolerate munching by caterpillars which turn into gorgeous swallowtail butterflies.

Yellow Jessamine, (Gelsemium sempervirens), is blooming now. This native twining vine with yellow tube-like flowers has a short period of showy color. Blossoms smell like baby powder. All parts are poisonous so educate the kids.

Another native vine is scarlet honeysuckle, (Lonicera sempervirens). Clusters of two inch long red tubular flowers are attractive to hummingbirds. It is more manageable than its yellow flowered cousin.

Cape honeysuckle, (Tecomaria capensis), has orange-red flowers which are attractive to hummingbirds. This small vine is often trimmed as a shrub.

Wisteria, (Wisteria sinensis), is a heavy twining vine and should be grown on a sturdy arbor or fence which can support the growth. The vines are deciduous and lose their leaves in winter. Flowers hang in purple or white grape-like clusters in early spring.

Virginia creeper is a native vine often mistaken for poison ivy. It is not poisonous and is distinguished by its leaf shape. Virginia creeper has a palmately compound leaf with five distinct leaf sections which radiate out from a central point. This is in contrast to the three part poison ivy leaf that many have learned to fear. Outdoor enthusiasts learn: "leaflets three, let it be."

Whether they climb, twine or wind, vines can help you keep your cool as we move into hot weather.

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