



Annual Vines are Fine!

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Vining plants add a vertical dimension to the garden. Sometimes this is just the touch needed to provide some height and color. Annual vines are typically vigorous and easy to grow. Use them to scamper over a chainlink fence, provide some privacy in an outdoor seating area, decorate the mailbox post, cascade from window boxes or provide interesting flowers and foliage to dress up a monotonous stretch of wall or fencing.

Annual vines range in length from just a couple of feet to more than 20 so choose one appropriate for your site. Most are easily started from seed, either planted directly in the ground or started indoors in early to mid-April.

Since most climb, they require some type of support. This can range from fancy metal or wood obelisks to homemade or storebought trellises, to use of existing fencing. Even some heavy twine dangling from eaves or other horizontal structure, could support the more twining vines, like morning glories. One can also make a teepee support with 3 or 4 bamboo poles or long saplings. These work especially well in the vegetable garden.

If there is one climber that everyone recognizes, it is likely 'Heavenly Blue' morning glory (*Ipomea tricolor* and others) with its brilliant sky blue flowers, a color so rare in plants. There are plenty of other morning glories to choose from in shades of purple, pink, blue, red and even bicolors. Consider other members of the morning glory family as well. The cardinal climber (*I. quamoclit*) is a big hit with hummingbirds. The tubular, 2-inch diameter bright red flowers contrast nicely with the dainty, palmate leaves. A favorite of mine is the moonflower (*I. alba*) with its huge, fragrant white flowers that open in the evening and close with approaching daylight. All are easy to grow and can be direct seeded although I find the moonflower does best if started indoors or purchased as a seedling as it already doesn't start to bloom until later in the summer.

Scarlet runner beans (*Phaseolus coccineus*) not only have bright red flowers that lure in hummingbirds, but they produce edible seed pods if harvested at the 2 to 3-inch length. Plus, the flowers are edible and delightful to use as a garnish. I stick at least one scarlet runner bean seed at the bottom of each of the 3-pole teepee I make for my pole beans. There are also pinkish and white cultivars available but the red really stands out.

Another edible pod producing vine is the hyacinth bean (*Lablab purpureus*), which can grow quite long over the summer reaching heights of 20 feet or more. Green leaves have burgundy veins and stems. About midsummer, plants start producing clusters of purple or white flowers that mature into burgundy-colored pods. Like the runner beans, the pods are edible when young and tender. They will turn green when cooked.

Last year I tried growing the cup and saucer vine (*Cobaea scandens*) also referred to as cathedral bells. The unique flowers resemble violet-colored cups that are sitting on more greenish saucer-like bases. The blossoms face downward and become more vibrantly colored as they mature. The vines were fairly vigorous and reached about 10 feet, but they did not start flowering until September. They should have probably been started indoors in late March instead of direct seeded.

Spanish flag (*I. lobata* formerly *Mina lobata*) is also attractive to hummingbirds. Sometimes called the firecracker vine, for good reason, this vine sports tubular flowers that are borne in clusters, called racemes. This is another later bloomer with more mature blossoms opening a fiery scarlet and then fading orange to cream as they age. Vigorous plants may reach to 10 or more feet in a favorable summer. Soak seeds for 24 hours before planting after all danger of frost has past.

Two shorter vining plants that may be better placed in window or porch boxes rather than expected to climb trellises are the trailing nasturtiums and black-eyed Susan vine (*Thunbergia alata*). Some varieties of nasturtiums can send out runners 6 feet long or more. Flowers are mostly in warm red to cream colors and runners don't really climb but are great cascading over porch railings. They too are hummingbird magnets.



Black-eyed Susan vine. Photo by dmp.

Black-eyed Susan vine will twine around anything placed in front of it. The species has golden flowers with black centers, hence its name. Even plants started indoors seem to only reach 3 to 4 feet in height so use them for trailing window box or container plants. Local garden centers have offered these plants in a large pot growing on a 3 or 4-sided obelisk that are quite eye-catching.

There are still a number of annual vines aside from these that one can try in containers or in the ground. It's a learning experience to grow one or more new plants each year. Try some new annual vines – their characteristics may delight and surprise you. For questions on growing annual vines or for your gardening questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.