



Vines

by Sue Rideout, UC Master Gardener

Do you have an ugly fence that you want to hide or at least decorate? Vines are a practical and attractive way to do just that. I have a chain link fence (ugly!) and a wooden one (drab) in my back yard and I've used a variety of vines to hide and decorate them.

Many think of ivy as a fence and ground cover, but it is not a very good choice for our area. Ivy can become invasive, crowd out native plants and actually endanger trees which it freely climbs and eventually chokes. In many parts of the West ivy is on the noxious weed list.

Potato vine (*Solanum laxum* or *jasminoides*), an evergreen flowering vine, is a great choice to cover a large fence. With green lance shaped leaves and white flowers borne in clusters, this vine can climb up to 30 feet, but it is easy to keep smaller by cutting it back. Less woody than many vines, the weight of its stems and foliage is relatively light, so it is easier to manage on a fence or lattice. Its heaviest bloom is in spring, but it will bear flowers though the fall.



Vines on a chain link fence



Crossvine (bignonia)

Crossvine (*Bignonia capreolata*) is a vigorous vine, growing up to 60 feet

with discs and tendrils which cling to almost anything. It is a woody evergreen vine with dark green waxy leaves and two inch long orange or scarlet trumpet-shaped blossoms. Thin it out or prune to shape in early spring before bloom. Crossvine blooms heavily in the spring and sporadically in summer. Hummingbirds love it.



Potato Vine

There are some trumpet vines which make great fence covers. Blood-red trumpet vine (*Distictis buccinatoria*), native to Mexico, will climb 20 to 30 feet with glossy evergreen leaves and tendrils for clinging. The four inch orange to red flowers stand out from the vine and are quite long-lasting. The fast-growing plant is very dense and needs strong support.

Common trumpet creeper (*Campsis radicans*) is native to the eastern U.S. but grows well here. It is semi-evergreen, losing some of its foliage in the winter. This vigorous climber has glossy

green leaves and will cling to wood, brick and other surfaces. Its 3 inch flowers are orange tubes with flaring red lobes borne in clusters at the tips of branches. A hard freeze may kill it to the ground but in spring new stems quickly appear.

Two kinds of jasmine offer fence camouflage. Yellow jasmine (*Jasminum mesnyi*) is an evergreen vining shrub with dark green leaflets and bright yellow unscented flowers. Its long branches can be attached to the top of the fence and allowed to cascade down. Yellow jasmine blooms primarily in the winter and spring with sporadic flowers at other times.

Common white jasmine (*Jasminum officinale*) is a semi-evergreen vine bearing very fragrant white flowers from summer through fall. It vines by twining stems and sports dark green leaves 2 to 3 inches long.

Some vines are better for decorating rather than hiding fences because of their sparse foliage or deciduous habit. One of my favorites is clematis; most are deciduous with a few evergreen vines. Their spectacular 4 to 6 inch blooms more than make up for their woody stems which may look dead in winter. The evergreen clematis vines bear smaller flowers but provide year round foliage.



Vines on a lattice fence

Passion vine is another decorative plant to spruce up a fence. This semi-evergreen vine bears four inch flowers said to represent the passion of Christ. The flowers are white shaded with pink and purple with a deep blue crown. A vigorous vine with 3-lobed leaves, it climbs 30 to 40 feet by tendrils and will require pruning and untangling.

A sunny area along a fence is a great place to try some edible landscaping. Scarlet runner bean provides a dense cover with clusters of bright scarlet flowers and vivid green leaves. The flowers are followed by dark green pods which are quite good to eat when young or shelled when dry. Pole snap beans are another candidate for cultivating on a fence, however they made need string or twine fastened to the fence for support.

Even some squash which bear small fruits, such as pattypan squash, may be grown along a fence. Be sure to pick the squash when they are small to avoid stressing the vines. Decorative gourds are another possibility for covering a strong fence such as chain link. Gourds are very fast growing from seed, but need a long season to bear their fruit.

All these vines like full sun (6 hours daily) to part shade; the decorative vines will tolerate more shade than the vegetable vines. A rich organic soil produces vigorous growth. These vines require moderate to regular water, especially the vegetables. A good way to water along a fence is with either a drip line or a soaker hose. Water is provided to the roots without wasting water wetting down the fence.

So if you have an ugly or drab fence, try some of these attractive vines to soften and decorate the landscape.

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