



LAYERS OF THE GARDEN: LATE SUMMER VINES

Table of Contents

Introduction: The Vertical Layer

Late Season Climbers

How Support Systems Shape Vertical Design

Nectar, Nesting, and Habitats

Designing for the Vertical Layer

Next Month Preview

The Vertical Layer

Each month, we return to the same question asked from a different angle: what does this layer of the garden actually *do*? And what would we lose if we stopped paying attention to it? We've moved through the ground layer and the root zone, through the horizontal plane of groundcovers, through the mid-border structure of shrubs and grasses. But now, in August, we rise.

The vertical layer is one of the garden's most powerful and underused dimensions: a plane of growth that operates independently of border space, that can transform a blank wall or a tired fence into something genuinely alive, and that reaches its fullest expression precisely in the weeks when much of the garden is beginning its slow retreat. Late summer vines are not a minor footnote to the season, but its final decision.

This month, we will discuss the challenges of vertical design and how it requires a different way of thinking. Support must be part of the design, so the vertical plane can have depth, shadow, and move in ways the horizontal layer rarely can.

Your Year at a Glance

~~January: Winter Structure~~

~~February: Alpine Plants~~

~~March: Special Treasures for Early Spring~~

~~April: Moss Gardening~~

~~May: Edible Flowers~~

~~June: Summer Fragrance Plants~~

~~July: Weed Control~~

August: Late Summer Vines

September: Ornamental Seed Heads

October: Late Fireworks

November: Texture, Evergreen Anchors, Preparing the Base Layer (Soil)

December: Conifers

Late Season Climbers

The plants listed below represent a sample of what is possible in the vertical layer from July through October in the PNW. Please note that Clematis pruning should be done according to the group that your specific species is in!



Campsis radicans

Height: 20–40 ft

Support: Very strong wall or pergola

PNW Note: Bold orange-red trumpets; hummingbird magnet. Needs a warm south/west wall in the PNW.



Clematis viticella (Group 3/C)

Height: 6–15 ft

Support: Trellis, wire, shrub host

PNW Note: The most reliable late-summer clematis for the PNW. Nearly 100 varieties to choose from!



Lonicera

Height: 15–20 ft (average)

Support: Strong trellis or pergola

PNW Note: Powerfully fragrant in evenings; major nectar source for hummingbirds. Many unique colors and varieties.



Solanum crispum 'Glasnevin'

Height: 15 ft

Support: Wall wire or trellis

PNW Note: Long-season purple-blue flowers with yellow anthers. Near-evergreen on sheltered walls.

How Support Systems Shape Vertical Design

The most common mistake in vine gardening is treating the support as purely functional, as something that needs to be hidden as quickly as possible. In reality, a pergola, a wire system, or a series of obelisks are present through winter when the vine is stripped back, and they shape the garden's bones in the same way a hedge or stone wall does. Designing the support with the same care as the planting is not a luxury. It is how good vertical gardens are made.

Four Support Systems (And What They Do!)

Tensioned Wire Systems

Galvanized or stainless wire strung horizontally at 12-18" intervals, held 2-4" from the wall, allows air to circulate behind the plant, which is critical for disease prevention. Invisible when covered, structurally strong, and easily adjusted.

Pergolas and Overhead Structures

A pergola invites the vertical layer into the horizontal plane, creating an overhead canopy of living cover. Site where it won't block winter light from the main borders, and scale the structure to the plant's ultimate vigor.

Obelisks and Freestanding Frames

Obelisks give vines a destination within the border rather than at its edge - particularly suited to annual vines. Choose powder-coated steel or hardwood: the structure is visible all winter and needs to earn its place in the off-season.

Host Plants

The most naturalistic approach is to train a vine into an existing shrub or hedge. To note: it is incredibly important to pair plants of compatible vigor to avoid the vine smothering its host.

*Special note: With pergolas and obelisks, it is important to remember that as an open structure, all light and temperature aspects need to be put into consideration when choosing the vines for your garden or landscape.

Nectar, Nesting, and Habitats

A vine in late summer is rarely just visual. Many vines are a significant late-season nectar source at precisely the moment when the garden's early flush has faded.

Vine	Ecological Role	Key Beneficiaries	Peak Bloom Period
Lonicera	High-value nectar	Hummingbirds, hawkmoths, bumblebees	July-September
Clematis viticella	Open nectar, seed heads for birds	Bees, Finches	July-October
Clematis texensis	Nectar source; seed heads	Finches	July-September
Campsis radicans	High-value tubular nectar	Hummingbirds, bumblebees	July-September
Solanum crispum 'Glasnevin'	Long-season open nectar	Bees, hoverflies	June-September



Designing for the Vertical Layer

The vertical layer fails when it is treated as an afterthought. A Clematis planted at the base of a fence because there was a gap to fill is very different from one planted as a considered wall composition. The difference is not in the plant, but in the intention.

Principles for Vertical Layer Design

1. Design From the Support Outward

Choose and install the support *before* the plant. A tensioned wire wall has very different possibilities than an obelisk or host plant. The support determines scale, siting, and which plants will work.

2. Match Vigor to Structure and Neighbor

Vigor matching is the most practically important decision in vine selection. Get it wrong, and no amount of pruning recovers the situation.

3. Layer the Vertical Plane

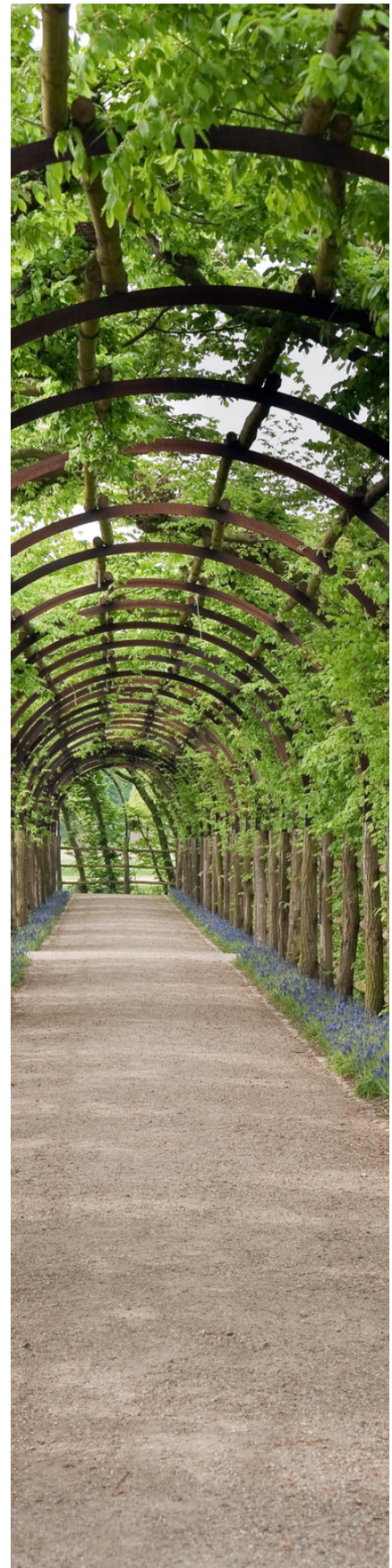
The most sophisticated vertical planting uses multiple plants on the same support: a self-clinging structural vine as the base layer, Clematis threading through for summer color, an annual filling gaps while permanent plantings establish. Each layer has a distinct role!

4. Design for Winter

Think, *'In November, what will this vine look like?'*

Brown Clematis stems draped on a pergola are not the same as the sinuous structure of Wisteria wood.

Winter character must be a selection criterion, not an afterthought.



Next Month Preview

In September, we turn from the upward reach of the vertical layer to something quieter and more precise: the architecture of the spent plant. The garden has been flowering for many months, and what it leaves behind when the petals fall is not absence - it is structure. The seed heads of plants such as Allium, Echinacea, Phlomis, and ornamental grasses (to name a few) do not merely persist - they organize the autumn light.

We will examine which species carry the best seed head architecture through the autumn and into winter, how to design for the dried-stem garden rather than merely tolerating it, and why the practice of cutting back too early is one of the quietest losses the autumn garden sustains. September is not a chapter of endings. It is the garden's most honest season, and the seed head is its most honest form.

