

Tangled Habitats – climbing plants provide wildlife shelter

The dense foliage and tangled limbs of creepers, climbers, and scramblers are loved by wildlife of all types as they provide shelter, roosting sites, and food all packed into a small space. And they offer great value to the gardener too with their ability to cling to structures and shape themselves around features and so provide vertical greenery in small or narrow areas.

Using a suitably sized climber to green up a bare patio wall can soften the harsh glare, cool the surrounding space, and even help to mute noise levels. Fast-growing species can hide an ugly garden shed, add an attractive feature to an old tree stump, or climb a tree to help the view of the entertainment area from the neighbour or road.

Birds use climbing habitats as nesting sites, particularly those with thorns, as foraging sites where they're sure to find caterpillars and other insects and invertebrates, and as quick protection when predators show up.

Many climbers host the larvae of butterfly and moth species too. And during a quick, hard shower of rain, or when the wind whips up bees and other flying creatures can find shelter when far from the nest.

Planting your creeper:

Solid walls and fences cast a rain shadow, the area immediately beneath a wall or fence where the rain doesn't fall. Often, conditions in this space are too dry for most plants. To avoid it, dig the planting hole about 45 cm away from the structure; you will need to angle the climbing stems towards the wall/ fence to attach them.

Forest-edge creepers enjoy their roots in the shade; you can ensure this by growing shrublets, perennials or groundcovers around the root area.

Management:

To get maximum foliage coverage tying and training of climbers is vital to encourage stems to grow in the directions you want. Annually check any ties that attach and guide the stems and loosen any that cut into the stems or restrict growth.

Light pruning of growing stems on new plants will encourage branching and leaf-growth. Well-established climbers may require a little seasonal trimming of the front growth to keep it in shape and thicken cover. Trim any limbs spreading into spaces where they're not welcome. *Thunbergia alata* (Black-eyed Susan) and *Senecio tamoides* (Canary Creeper) often shoot along the ground and pop up over a shrub a few meters away. Be aware of any wildlife residents when you do this; if there are any nesting birds; rather wait until their babies have flown off.

Which climbers to use where:

In many urban gardens humans are often within arms' reach of the garden boundaries, so try to find a corner to which you're prepared to limit your excursions. Use a light, soft creeper that is unlikely to strangle or smother a small tree or shrub. And, should a bird plant one of our beautiful wild creepers – *Senecio deltoideus*, *Distephanus angulifolius* (= *Vernonia angulifolia*) – move it while still small. They'll tangle as beautifully up a trellis or over an arch, or over a wall as do the tried and trusted species below. Other wild, thorny climbers – *Dalbergia*, *Dioscorea* – are best kept along the boundary fence and well-managed to keep them from spreading into the garden.

Clematis brachiata Traveller's Joy

This is a robust climber able to spread across the canopy of a small tree or shrub, but it's quite easy to keep it in check if necessary. In small gardens, rather confine to a container with a supportive trellis, or allow it to spread over a length of boundary fence. Cream flowers make a quite beautiful display when spilling from the canopy of a tree. Plants grow quickly and spread via suckers from the root section. Flowers bring in butterflies and other insects and seed heads are used to line nests. 5 moth species breed on this climber. Prune in winter when dormant. Plant in sun or partial shade.

Aloiampelos (= Aloe) ciliaris Climbing Aloe

A succulent scrambler with long, flexible woody stems that love to clamber up trees and shrubs, where the orange-red flowers can peep from behind the foliage as high up as 5 – 6 m. For an out-of-the-ordinary bower, plant the Climbing Aloe to thread its way through a companion creeper like the evergreen *Senecio macroglossus* or *Jasminum multipartitum*. Plant in sun and semi- or light shade. Frost hardy. Nectar- and pollen-filled flowers entice birds and insects.

Jasminum multipartitum Starry Wild –Jasmine

This is another scrambler that, without support, will grow into a soft, formless shrub. Allow it to clamber up a tree, across a fence, or use it close to the house supported by a trellis or pergola where you get to smell the sweet scent of the flowers. Plant it in a mixed wildlife shrubbery to knit the various components together, and provide overlapping stems to support nests and offer protected foraging areas. Plant in sun or semi-shade. Birds eat the ripe, black fruit, its host to 2 moth species, and flowers attracts butterflies and other insects. Evergreen in warm climates, it will quickly hide old tree stumps, outbuilding, or cover a wall/fence. Prune after flowering.

Senecio macroglossus Flowering Ivy

Luckily, this attractive genus provides a small-garden alternative to the well-known rampant Canary Creeper, *S. tamoides*. A slender creeper Small creamy-yellow daisy flowers cover the

small, ivy-shaped leaves through summer, and on and off through the year. It is neat and small enough to quickly twine over a pergola or up a trellis without interfering with any gutters or tiles. Prune back at the end of winter. Sun, semi-shade. Flowers mainly in summer. There is a variegated form that would help lighten a shady spot, but in the sun, I prefer the stronger, bright green leaves to show off the lemon-yellow flowers.

Senecio tamoides Canary Creeper

One for the large garden, The Canary Creeper is a spectacular creeper that provides birds and butterflies with important autumn nourishment. In my neck of the woods, large heads of egg-yolk yellow flowers spill from tall trees, over boundary fences, every possible support, in fact. This creeper self-seeds prolifically, and I had a curtain of Canary Creeper stems hanging down from the patio gutter. The strong thick stems criss-cross to provide many nooks and crevices for nests and non-nest building creatures. The large, succulent leaves also provide cover from rain and wind – for crawling and flying insects including bees. This creeper need to be controlled as stems root where they touch the ground and grow at lightning speed. Keep a look out for newly germinating plants as they'll rapidly grow to cover a shrub and pulling it out at that stage will damage the supporting plant. But, for a boundary fence or shrubbery in a large garden, the Canary Creeper provides quick, attractive cover through the year. Flowers entice many butterflies and insects to feed, and leaves host the larvae of 2 moth species. Bulbuls, White-eyes and sunbirds use the fluffy seed heads to line their nests. Prune back at the end of winter.

Thunbergia alata Black-eyed Susan

Well-known and used around the world, I think of this as the dusty creeper as I'm usually showered with dusty debris when I pull out any self-seeded plants or cut back an old, tired climber at the end of winter. But, when young and fresh, it is quite beautiful with flowers of yellow to orange - even brick red or pink are now available. This is a twining creeper with thin, strong stems that help it to scale any support but appearing never to grow more than 3 m high. This is a lovely, light creeper for a small pergola or patio trellis, and will cover an old stump or dead tree within weeks. I find stems creeping along the ground until they find another support. But it is easy to manage by clipping any stems that wander off from the main plant. You'll find new plants germinating close by, so be sure to pull them out and move to the boundary fence. Plants in cold climates will lose leaves but regrow rapidly in spring. Flowers attract butterflies – its host to the Eyed Pansy and 2 moth species, and leaves and stems are used by insects, invertebrates and spiders which attract the insectivorous birds.

SCRAMBLING PLANTS:

Barleria obtusa Bush Violet

This well-known, scrambling shrub can be used to great effect as a climber if given a trellis or fence to support its scrambling habit. Here, left to find its own path, a few self-seeded plants cover a 2.5 m high gum-pole trellis where it intertwines beautifully with *Thunbergia alata* producing an eye-catching curtain colour – a classic blue and orange combination. The twining *Thunbergia* stems may well be providing extra support for the *Barleria* that has helped produce this lovely screen. What I love about its use here is that there is no need to trim any of the Bush Violet's wayward limbs. Birds forage amongst the leaves for caterpillars and other insects and invertebrates; the trumpet-shaped flowers are popular with bees. The foliage will be trimmed back at the end of winter to encourage fresh, bushy growth for the next season.

Plumbago auriculata Cape Leadwort

The *Plumbago* is a multi-talented shrub with a natural scrambling habit we can use to provide a tangled protective habitat for our garden wildlife. In the wild, it is often seen clambering up the trunk and along branches of thorn trees, so why not use this natural pairing in your garden too. If planted along a boundary between trees and other shrubs the Cape Leadwort will help to knit them together and form an attractive screening barrier. It is popularly mixed with the Cape Honeysuckle, *Tecomaria capensis*, but the clusters of blue flowers would look equally good scrambling up the yellow-flowering *Bauhinia tomentosa*, purple *Polygala myrtifolia*, pink *Dombeya* or any of the cream *Buddleja* shrubs. Or use it on its own, as seen here where a few shrubs have grown into a magnificent powder-blue curtain attracting numerous butterfly species and the Greater Double-collared Sunbird during our visit. Beetles and caterpillars eat the leaves which attracts insectivorous birds; *Plumbago* is the host plant of the Common Blue butterfly, and 2 moth species. This scrambler grows fast, is water wise and moderately frost hardy, but will regrow rapidly in spring. Prune after flowering.

Rhoicissus tomentosa Common Forest Grape

R. tomentosa, being the most used in gardens are vigorous climbers able to scale trees of great height but should be avoided in small, urban gardens. I've seen *R. tomentosa* smother a group of small trees on the boundary between a nature reserve and home garden. Recently, a friend has removed 3 plants growing in brick containers damaged by the strong roots. The dense foliage had provided attractive, cooling shade, and the juicy, edible fruits brought in birds, insects and monkeys. *Jasminum multipartitum* now grow in their place, but it will take a few years to produce shade-giving cover. In Kirstenbosch *R. tomentosa* covers a low wall along a path; I can only imagine the wonderful world of wildlife beneath the leaves.

Capparis tomentosa Woolly Caper Bush

This is an excellent choice to provide boundary security and offer wildlife food and refuge. It is a spiny scrambler, with strong, hooked thorns that it uses to climb. *Capparis* a canopy climber with attractive orange fruits, and flowers for birds, butterflies and other insects, but this is one for a garden with sufficient space for its long limbs. Turacos eat the small flower buds but enough survive to put on a spectacular spring show. The *Capparis* is a favourite of landscaper, Jenny Dean. In her September 2016 article, she wrote, "*Capparis tomentosa* (Woolly caper bush) pushes its powder puff blooms through its thorny thicket in September. And what a joy they are. I love finding them in early spring knowing that the flowers will be followed by orange fruits much loved by birds and monkeys. What a pleasure to feed the monkeys naturally. *Capparis* is exceptionally good for butterflies being the host plant to many butterflies. The butterflies are beautiful – white, yellow, veined with fascinating names like African Small White, Black-veined White, Spillers Sulphur Yellow, Forest White and False Dotted Border, Bushveld Orange Tip, Queen Purple Tip and there are more. One needs space to grow *Capparis* – thorny and robust; it can cover a 15m span in a few years. Mine tumbles over a fence, forming a perfect barrier and supplying wonderful nesting opportunities for birds".

Scutia myrtina Cat-thorn

The Cat-thorn has sharp, hooked thorns growing in pairs along the stem, and forms an attractive and impenetrable though robust security hedge. Flowers and fruits are small and are popular with a variety of birds. Foliage hosts the larvae of 2 butterfly and 16 moth species! A must for large wildlife-friendly gardens with space enough for its vigorous, scrambling needs.