

Wrestling with Wisteria

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Long dangling tresses of flowers in various shades of lilac, pink, and white make wisteria a favorite ornamental vine. But when allowed to run freely, wisteria vines are capable of strangling trees and tearing shingles, gutters, and downspouts off adjacent buildings. And, adding insult to injury, they often fail to bloom. The solution to both problems is limiting the vine's rampant growth and redirecting its energy into an annual spring show with a firm hand.

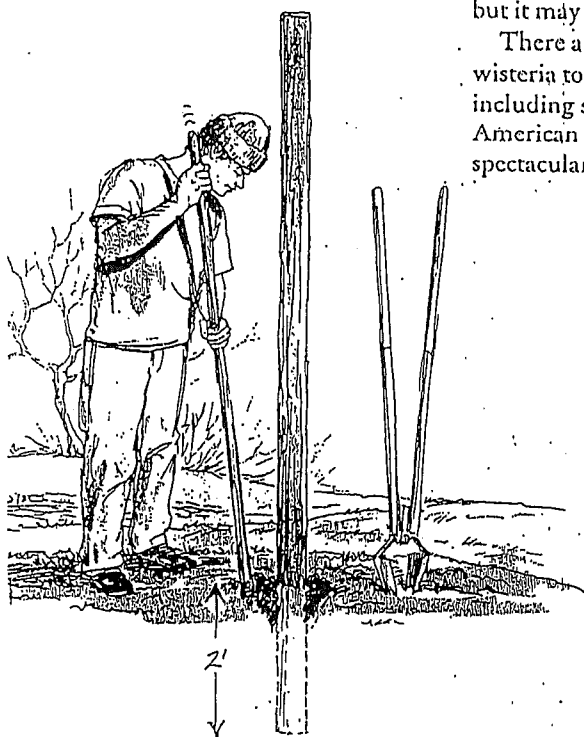
Wisteria vines can be trained into a multitude of shapes, from a formal espalier against a wall to a canopy for a pergola. I find the simplest and safest style to be a single-stemmed vine held up by a free-standing post. The following steps begin with a newly purchased vine. If your wisteria is already established, the same twice-a-year pruning applies. In short, whether you are starting early or late, it's time to show your wisteria who's in charge.

1. Select a Grafted Plant

The best, and most free-flowering, wisteria varieties are grafted plants that have been propagated from vines known to bear early. Vines that have been raised from seed will eventually bloom, but it may take decades.

There are nine species of wisteria to choose from, including several North American natives. The most spectacular, with racemes of

bloom up to three feet long, are varieties of the Japanese wisteria (*W. floribunda*) and the Chinese (*W. sinensis*). The former is the hardier of the two, and climbs by spiraling from right to left, instead of from left to right. Whatever variety you choose, look for a potted specimen with at least one strong leader.



2. Provide a Support

With time, the trunk of your wisteria may become thick enough to hold itself up. But until then it will need a strong support. This can be a post made from rot-resistant wood, such as black locust, or a metal pipe. Just remember that the upright will be in the ground for a while, and will be subject to considerable lateral force from the wind once the vine is

mature. Set the support a good two feet into the ground, tamp it in well, and cut it off at the height that you want the top of your wisteria vine to be. Later, you can attach a short crossbar to accommodate a larger crown.

Sandy soil and lots of water will favor generous bloom. A handful of superphosphate worked into the soil before planting will also help.



3. Plant and Tie the Young Vine

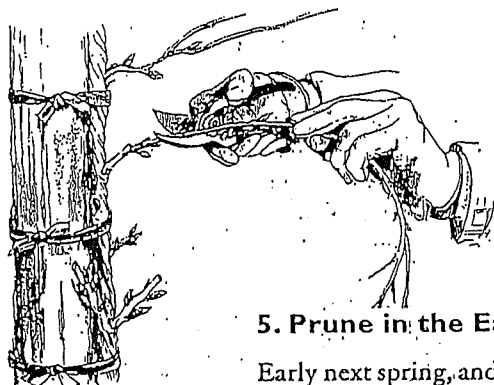
Plant the vine at the base of your support, positioning it so it is the same level as in the nursery. Next, disentangle the stem(s) from any support the plant came with. Select the longest and strongest stem and gently tie it to the post with soft twine. Try to straighten the stem out as much as you can with multiple ties, since this will ultimately determine the shape of the trunk. Then prune off all remaining shoots at the base of the tied stem to direct the vine into upward growth. Over the course of the summer, the stem will need retying repeatedly as it grows. As soon as the leader reaches the top of the post, cut off its tip. This will encourage the development of side branches and a crown.



4. Prune in the Summer

Any side shoots that develop lower down the stem can initially be left to provide energy to the lengthening leader. In midsummer, however, they should be cut back to within six inches of their bases. This midsummer pruning of the laterals will become an annual event. It can be done all at once or over a period of weeks, but it

is key to keeping any wisteria within bounds. Pruning the side shoots when the wood of the new shoots has begun to harden not only limits the vine's size, but will favor the development of flower buds. (You should not, however, expect your first flowers until two years after planting.)



5. Prune in the Early Spring

Early next spring, and every spring thereafter when the vine is leafless, you should completely remove any side branches that are in undesirable locations. As for the remaining laterals, these must be cut back again, this time leaving only two or three dormant buds. This is a technique known as spur pruning. It may seem drastic to remove this much of the vine each year, but if you

ignore the pruning you will sacrifice bloom. Hard pruning twice a year not only keeps the wisteria within bounds, but also gives the best display of flowers. Despite all the cutting, there will be no shortage of picturesque foliage. Forget the hands-off approach. There's no substitute for rolling up your sleeves and tackling your wisteria twice a year. For vine and gardener alike, it's a win. ❧