

Climbers for a perpetual-flowering tropical garden

An outdoor perpetual-flowering garden in the tropics can be created by careful choice of plants.

By F.S.P. Ng



Thunbergia laurifolia (Purple Clock Vine)

A garden in the humid tropics is, by default, a garden of leaves. Leaves have two vital functions. One is to photosynthesise and make food for the plant. The other is to enable a plant to occupy and defend its space against other plants. In the tropics and particularly in the humid tropics where the climate allows for continuous growth and competition, the production of leaves for occupation and defence of space takes precedence over the

production of flowers. However, one can create a cheerful outdoor garden with colourful flowers throughout the year by careful selection of plants for superior flowering characteristics. These are plants that have been selected over many generations by alert and discriminating gardeners. Among the most rewarding plants are the 20 climbers (vines) featured here, that can be relied upon for a good show at all times. Most of these plants are propagated vegetatively.

Vegetative propagation is necessary to preserve desired genetic characteristics such as perpetual flowering behaviour. The main exception in this list is the Bottle Gourd, which is grown from seeds but is self-pollinated and easy to maintain in genetically pure lines.

Climbers are sun-demanding and they climb on other plants or supporting structures to get into the sun. The most powerful climbers are those that twine round the stems of free-standing plants. Others climb with tendrils, spines, thorns, or right-angled branches that catch and entangle nearby vegetation.

In a garden, a climber would need to be provided with a trellis, wall, fence, pergola, or arch, to climb on. Vertical fences and garden walls such as these in the frontage of houses are suitable for climbers that display flowers on their sides. Pergolas with high roofs are needed for displaying flowers that hang in long strings. Flowers that jut above the foliage are best displayed on low walls and other structures that facilitate viewing of the flowers at eye level.

Most climbers have to be pruned periodically to remove spent inflorescences and bare stems. Pruning removes unsightly materials and most importantly it stimulates new growth to rejuvenate the plant. The more often pruning is done, the less difficult it is to keep the plant in good shape.

The most prolific climbers develop large leafy crowns and correspondingly large root systems. These are best grown rooted in the ground. If grown in planter boxes the boxes should be suitably large. In the quadrangle of the library of Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman in Kampar, Malaysia, I have made two pergolas, each 137 ft long and 15 ft wide, and planted with *Thunbergia laurifolia* to provide cool shaded walkways. These are probably the longest pergolas in the world.

***Allamanda blanchetii* (Red Allamanda)**

Native to Brazil, this semi-woody twining climber can be tied to the central post of an umbrella-like support and allowed to spread out over the top to make an attractive tree-like structure bearing large purplish-red flowers near the branch tips. The related yellow-flowered *Allamanda cathartica* (Yellow Allamanda) is more vigorous and more branchy, requiring more frequent pruning to keep in shape.



Allamanda blanchetii (Red Allamanda)

***Bauhinia kockiana* (Peacock Bauhinia)**

A native of Malaysia, this woody climber flowers only intermittently in nature, but domesticated forms are quite free-flowering. The flowers are in large clusters that begin yellow and change to orange-red, so a mixture of colours is displayed at all times.

***Bougainvillea* ‘Formosa’**

Native to Brazil, bougainvilleas are by nature thorny woody climbers. There has been a lot of hybridization between species, resulting in varieties with many different colours. Many varieties have been selected for shrubby growth habit and some are even thornless.

One of the most spectacular of the free-flowering climbing varieties, known by the cultivar name of ‘Formosa’, was first named and exhibited in London in 1904 (Menninger 1970). The light purple flowers of ‘Formosa’ form at the tips of the growing stems and as they age the flowers become dry and papery but do not fall off until the flower stalks wither away. As the stems continue to elongate and add on new flowers, the plant gets covered with spectacular cascading floral sprays over six feet long. ‘Formosa’ was common in the colonial gardens of British Malaya but is uncommon now. It may have been responsible for the Malay name *bunga kertas* (paper flower) for all bougainvilleas. I have seen ‘Formosa’ in some other countries and they are very striking in gardens on the Adriatic coast of Croatia.



Bauhinia kockiana (Peacock Bauhinia)



Bougainvillea ‘Formosa’



Cissus nodosa (Stringy Cissus; Thousand Roots) being trimmed

***Cissus nodosa* (Stringy Cissus; Thousand Roots)**

This slender vigorous tendril-climbing plant is native to Indonesia. It flowers continuously but the flowers are small and inconspicuous. The plants are grown for their long dangling air roots that are dense enough to be trimmed into decorative designs. The roots grow so quickly that they have to have a ‘haircut’ twice a week. They look untidy if left untrimmed.



Cissus nodosa untrimmed

***Duranta erecta* (Golden Dewdrop)**

A native of tropical America, this plant produces sprays of small white or purple flowers followed by small greenish-yellow or orange-yellow berries at the ends of short side shoots. When tied to a vertical trellis and allowed to produce side shoots, each shoot ends in a mass of pendent flowers or berries, making a very decorative wall. I once saw a high stone wall in Malta covered with thousands of *Duranta* flowers and berries. After flowering and fruiting, the spent branches should be trimmed off to encourage new branches to develop and flower. When grown and trimmed as a low shrub or hedge, the plant does not get a chance to flower properly.



Duranta erecta (Golden Dewdrop)

***Ipomoea indica* (Indian Morning Glory)**

This plant is native to South America (Staples & Syahida-Emiza, 2015) and its name probably alludes to the West Indies, as the Caribbean region used to be called. It is a soft-stemmed slender twining climber bearing large deep bluish-purple flowers that open in the morning and fade in the afternoon. Under garden conditions, when the plant is not allowed to spread at will, it is relatively short-lived and should be renewed by cuttings taken from the tender terminal parts of the shoots while the plant is still vigorous. When it is already in decline, cuttings may fail to root. Under unrestricted conditions the plant can spread along the ground and rejuvenate itself by rooting wherever it comes into contact with soil. Since the flowers fade conspicuously in the afternoon, the plant should not be grown in a conspicuous location. A less prominent



Ipomoea indica (Indian Morning Glory)



Jasminum multiflorum (Furry Jasmine) trained on an umbrella-shaped support

location is good enough because when the plant is in full bloom in the morning, it calls attention to itself no matter where it is grown.

***Jasminum multiflorum* (Furry Jasmine)**

This is a robust woody twining climber, native of India, bearing masses of fragrant white flowers. It requires a strong support and may be grown resting on a low wall or tied to an umbrella-shaped support.



Lagenaria siceraria (Bottle Gourd)

***Lagenaria siceraria* (Bottle Gourd)**

A short-lived slender tendril-climber grown for its ornamental fruits which can be used as water containers. This is the only plant known to have been present in the Americas as well as in Africa and Asia before the voyage of Columbus. There are varietal differences in the size and shape of the gourds. Mini gourds two to three inches long are less showy on a pergola than medium sized gourds. The life span of the plant is usually less than one year so for a perpetual display, new plants have to be started from seeds before the old plants decline.



Lonicera japonica (Japanese Honeysuckle)

***Lonicera japonica* (Japanese Honeysuckle)**

A slender woody twining climber, with sweetly-scented flowers that change from white to pale yellow. This plant can be tied to a post and allowed to produce side branches that flower profusely at their ends.



Mansoa alliacea (Garlic Vine)

***Mansoa alliacea* (Garlic Vine)**

A slender semi-woody tendril-climber, native to tropical America, with leaves and flowers smelling of garlic when crushed. Until about 20 years ago, the plants flowered irregularly at unpredictable intervals following some unknown climatic stimulus that would simultaneously trigger flowering over a wide area. The new varieties flower almost continuously.



Marsdenia floribunda (Stephanotis)

***Marsdenia floribunda* (Stephanotis)**

A slender semi-woody twining climber bearing clusters of waxy pure white fragrant flowers, native of Madagascar. The original plants were shy to flower but modern varieties flower year round. The flowers remain fresh and turgid after plucking so they are used in floral bouquets.



Pentalinon luteum

Pentalinon luteum

A native of tropical America, this is a slender twining climber with yellow flowers, resembling *Allamanda cathartica* but is more elegant and manageable.



Piper nigrum (Pepper Vine)

***Piper nigrum* (Pepper Vine)**

This is the true pepper (not a chilli or capsicum pepper) that climbs on posts. The flowers are inconspicuous but the fruits are borne abundantly in attractive spikes at the ends of short branches. These can be pickled while green or allowed to ripen and dry, to be ground into pepper powder

for spicing up food. Native to India, the Pepper Vine has been in cultivation for over 2000 years. It was mentioned by Theophrastus (372-287BC) among the plants of India encountered by the army of Alexander the Great.

***Quisqualis indica* (Drunken Sailor, Rangoon Creeper)**

This is a woody twining climber of tropical Asia with a history of cultivation that goes back perhaps 2000 years (Li, 1979). There are several varieties. A double-flowered variety appeared in about 1995 and became so popular that the single-flowered varieties almost became extinct. The flowers of some varieties open white in the evening and emit a fragrance, then change to pink next morning and finally red. There are varieties that start pink and change to red and varieties that lack fragrance. In India there is a form with white flowers (Menninger 1970).

The name *Quisqualis* is Latin for “what is it?” was coined by Rumphius, a botanist in the Dutch

East India Company in the 1600s. According to one account, the plant had an Indonesian name *udani* that sounded to Rumphius like the Dutch *hoedanig* meaning “what sort” or “what is it”. This gave Rumphius the idea of calling it *Quisqualis*.



Quisqualis indica (Drunken Sailor, Rangoon Creeper) double-flowered form



Quisqualis indica on a big circular pergola used for outdoor functions of up to 40 participants.



Quisqualis indica, single-flowered form



Pandorea jasminoides (Bower Vine)

***Pandorea jasminoides* (Bower Vine)**

A slender climber, native to Australia. This is an easily manageable twining plant that is suitable for a small space.

***Saritaea magnifica* (Glow Vine)**

This is a vigorous woody tendril-climber, native of tropical America, that requires a strong support. The large purple flowers are borne above the foliage so the supporting structure should be a low wall or trellis for the flowers to be appreciated easily.



Saritaea magnifica (Glow Vine)



Thunbergia laurifolia (Purple Clock Vine) on a 137 ft long pergola

***Thunbergia laurifolia* (Purple Clock Vine) and *Thunbergia grandiflora* (White Clock Vine)**

The clock vines are vigorous woody twining climbers, native of Burma and India. In Malaysia, *T. laurifolia* has leaves longer than broad, and purple flowers on pendulous inflorescences 1–2 ft long while *T. grandiflora* has broadly heart-shaped leaves and white flowers on longer pendulous inflorescences 3–5 ft long. After flowering the leafy shoots bearing the spent inflorescences should be cut back to encourage new growth. The cutting back of the shoots should be spread out evenly through time so that new shoots and inflorescences are produced continuously.



Thunbergia grandiflora (White Clock Vine)

If all the shoots are cut back at the same time, the new flowers will all appear at the same time and the flowering pattern will change from continuous to intermittent.

The flowers attract big carpenter bees that look threatening but are harmless. The males are stingless. The females have stings but do not

sting unless directly provoked e.g. if one tries to catch them by hand.

***Tristellateia australasiae* (Maiden's Jealousy)**

A tropical Asian plant, the maiden's jealousy is a slender semi-woody twining climber that bears masses of golden yellow flowers. Each flower lasts three days. The origin of the common name is unknown.



Tristellateia australasiae (Maiden's Jealousy)



Vallaris glabra (Kesidang, Kerak Nasi)

***Vallaris glabra* (Kesidang, Kerak Nasi)**

Of South East Asian origin, this is a woody twining climber with white flowers, producing a fragrance reminiscent of scorched rice, to which the Malay name Kerak Nasi alludes. To rice-consumers, this fragrance is familiar and attractive. The plant is particularly popular in Malacca where it is the state flower. Some plants flowers almost continuously. If the roots are cut in the ground new shoots can arise from the wounds and such shoots can be separated to make new plants.

Where to see flowering climbers

All the plants described here may be viewed at the Secret Garden of I Utama in Kuala Lumpur where they contribute to its reputation as possibly the most spectacular rooftop garden in the world.

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