

# Don't waste your walls



Our gardening column answering common gardening conundrums by Lynn O'Keefe tells us to make use of walls and shows you the value of climbers and wall shrubs

**A**lmost every garden has walls, be they the garden walls or the house or garage walls. But suburban and urban gardens have more than their fair share of walls.

So, to ignore your walls is to waste a great opportunity to add colour and interest to your garden. Bare concrete walls (the most common type) are grey and grim and can be much improved by plastering and painting, stone facing, or you can even hang mirrors to bring in light, mosaics for colour, bird boxes and bee hotels for wildlife. But as a gardener, there's nothing I like more than to cover them in climbing plants too!

Climbing plants and wall shrubs are a special genre of plants that bring colour and scent and extra habitat to a garden, no matter how small. They add verticality without the need for trees. Some need wires or trellis to climb like honeysuckle, and others will self-cling like ivy, so decide which kind you want before starting.

## N.B. PREPARE THE WALL-

First up get the wall into the condition you want before planting, as any jobs after that are going to be tricky once the climber is growing on the wall. So, power wash, plaster,

paint, point or repair ahead of securing wires or trellis or planting self-clinging climbers. Consider painting the wall to improve the look while waiting for the climbers to establish. Paint it green to make the climber appear bigger and blend in, paint white for a clean bright look, great for a dark shady wall. Go for browns or terracotta for warmth.

## WIRING UP

The wall can then be lined with horizontal wires attached with nails or vine eyes for plants to grow up and twist around. This is a cheap and cheerful way to cover large walls with plants. It's suitable for climbing roses, and anything that twines like clematis, or to tie in wall shrubs like Cotoneaster or Pyracantha. It has a long life, and low maintenance, you just might need to add new nails from time to time. Easy to do on wooden fencing panels, but requires a drill for stone and concrete block walls. Note that climbing plants can get very heavy with time and really pull on those nails.

## TIMBER TRELLIS

An expensive option, fiddly to make yourself, but aesthetically pleasing, it will rot over time and

need to be replaced - which with a mature climbing rose is a very prickly job! Suitable for roses and twining plants including sweet peas. If you're using a trellis consider painting the trellis a contrasting bright colour like red or blue, to make a feature of it while waiting for the climbers to grow.

## Free form self-clinging plants

These are great because you don't need any supports, so they're cheaper. They attach themselves directly to the wall, but this can however cause damage around windows, gutters, and slates on roofs, but are usually fine on perimeter garden walls.

Boston ivy and Virginia creeper are self-clinging climbers, slow to start but once they take off can grow vigorously, turning fantastic oranges and reds in autumn. They are however deciduous (lose their leaves in winter) so you're left looking at the wall beneath and all the bare plant stems. As you can't paint a wall behind a self-clinging climber this can be unsightly, so they're best on brick and stone faced walls.

Ivy is an evergreen self-clinging climber, that means you never see the wall beneath, so very good on ugly walls, concrete block walls etc. Ivies come in many golden and silver variegations and are much maligned, but ivy is the ultimate wildlife plant. Ivy flowers at the end of summer and is vital for pollinators, it then produces copious berries for birds from Christmas on, as well as shelter for roosting and nesting in amongst its evergreen leaves.



Painting a wall brown or terracotta will bring warmth and improve the appearance while waiting for the climbers to establish.

Butterflies and moths overwinter in it too as do many other insects. You don't necessarily want ivy on your house, but on a shed or garden wall it should be left where possible. By the way it doesn't strangle trees, but that's for another article!

## WHAT TO PLANT?

The wall itself is the important bit here. It can face north, south, east or west, and this has a huge effect on what you can grow. A north facing wall is very shady and gets almost no direct sunshine whatsoever, meanwhile a south facing wall can be very warm and dry.

East facing walls are dry, sheltered and get the morning sun while a west facing wall gets the full blast of the wind and rain.

It is also worth bearing in mind that concrete walls and house/shed walls are built on wide foundations underground, so you need to plant at least 30cm out so as not to be planting onto the wall plate, then train the plant towards the wall or trellis with a short bamboo cane. Be sure to fit the size of the plant to the

size of the wall.

A 'Rambling' rose is the kind that featured in Sleeping Beauty to hide the castle for 100 years, while a 'Climbing' rose is a well behaved plant that will cover a garden wall 2m high and no more.

Pyracantha is another thorny intruder proof plant that has flowers for pollinators, berries for birds and provides safe nesting sites. Wisteria can get huge on a sunny wall and in full flower is glorious and the scent is intoxicating, but it can take 12 years to flower...so have you got the patience?

Native honeysuckle will flower the year you buy it, take wind, rain and a bit of shade, and smell nearly as good.

Put in a bit of research before you hit the garden centres as they've usually got a very good range of climbers available, and make the best of the walls in your garden!

Lynn O'Keefe DSc Horticulture, Craft gardener with the OPW at Portumna Castle Co. Galway and Horticulture tutor with the Galway Roscommon Education and Training Board.

This series is supported by the Heritage Offices of Laois, Offaly and Westmeath County Councils, with funding from the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of Housing, Heritage and Local Government, under the National Biodiversity Action Plan. For gardeners interested in becoming more wildlife friendly, why not check out [pollinators.ie](http://pollinators.ie) or go to <https://laois.ie/gardening-for-biodiversity/> for your free booklet.



Climbers of all types can really brighten up a dark corner and create habitat and feeding places for wildlife too.

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