

Creepers, Climbers, Twiners, Lianas, Vines, and Wines

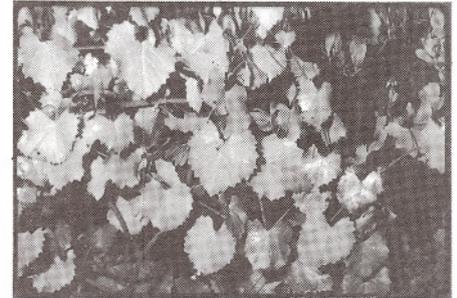
by Daniel F. Austin



Railroad-vine (*Ipomoea pes-caprae*)



Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*)



Grapevine (*Vitis rotundifolia*)

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Some time ago, a letter from a friend of mine in Pakistan said of a paper that I had written, "The term 'vine', though quite correct, is rather foreign to non-American readers, and I have changed it to climbers, twiners, etc."

For a while I was astonished that English-speaking people outside the United States did not use the word "vine". Then I thought of plants called trumpet creepers, Virginia creepers, Rangoon creepers, coral creepers, railway creepers, elephant creepers, and elephant climbers. I remembered noticing that "climber" or "creeper" was used in Pakistan and Sri Lanka when I was there, and that they had never used the word "vine". At the time I thought it curious, but had neither the opportunity nor time to look into it further. Also, I remembered that we took our word "vine" from French and Latin words that specifically reference to "The Vine", or the grapevine (*Vitis vinifera*). Indeed, in many places outside the United States, the word "vine" still refers to only the grapevine from which wine is made. "Wine" itself is taken from the same base word, *vinum*.

Finally, I realized that what the British call "American English" — a complex mixture of languages from various times and geographic regions — has obscured the original meanings of many American words. Eng-

lish in other countries has sometimes retained a purer (or older) form of words, or at least their meaning.

Words that we use to talk about certain growth habits of plants show several related ideas.

A "climber" is a plant that goes up some supporting host, as the original Anglo-Saxon word *climban* implies. Similar concepts are found in the Spanish words *enredadera* and *trepador*. This action in plants is achieved by using specialized leaves or other organs called tendrils, or by wrapping the stem around something else so that the result is an ascending of the growing tip. Typically, this movement is a product of the biological functions causing the plant to grow toward brighter light.

Closely related is the idea inherent in the word "creeper". This again is an Anglo-Saxon derivative, coming from *creopan*. when climbers fail to find a support, they trail along the ground, or creep, until they find something to grow up. Many plants that are primarily climbers send off shoots that creep along the ground until they find something to elevate them. This action seems to be a mechanism to increase the area in the plant producing food for those parts using energy.

Well known to anyone who has purposefully or accidentally been involved with these types of plants is that they are "twiners" and wrap

around everything possible. This is a form of *twinen*, the Middle English form of another Anglo-Saxon word. Inherent in these words is the concept of being tangled, snarled, and twisted. This idea is almost the same as that used in the French *liane* and Spanish *liana*. These latter words are taken from *lier* that means to tie or bind.

Because the original "grapevine" creeps, climbs, twines, and binds, Americans have used 'vine' as the word for all creepers, climbers, twiners, and binders. In the United States we have a conglomerate of people and we tend to apply words broadly. A few of the archaic meanings have persisted in common names such as "trumpet creeper", but we mostly use the word "vine" as a general term. In England and the countries where British influence has been most important, the Anglo-Saxon meanings have often been kept for the variety of plants, and "vine" is still strictly applied to the grapevine. In the United States few even realize the antiquity of the product or of the word when they sip a glass of wine with their meals. Fewer still know that "wine" and "vine" are etymologically so closely related.

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