Tree Vines

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Illustrated by Lucile Walton

One day, after a particularly arduous morning fighting the honeysuckle in her yard, I heard my mother-in-law remark that if she were allowed to redesign her environment, she would make a world that had no vines in it. Under the circumstances she was, I think, fully justified in her extreme position. However, in such a world there would be a dearth of some very attractive plants and I should like to take time now to talk about a few of them.

Vines are not necessarily parasites but they do depend for mechanical support on other plants and structures. A vine could be defined as a plant whose main stem cannot stand up by itself and it must either trail along the ground or climb, wind and entwine around other plants, trees, walls, rough ground and anything else available. A vine which winds regularly round a stem or pole usually does so in the same direction, i.e., clockwise or anticlockwise, throughout the species, but there is little foundation for the popular tale that plants which wind in one direction north of the equator will do so in the opposite direction south of the equator. In the yam (Dioscorea) the twist is always clockwise (viewed from the top), while in the bittersweet (Celastrus) the twist is always anticlockwise. Darwin made a close study of twining plants and timed the movement of the tip of a bindweed (Convolvulus) plant while it waved around, as it were, “feeling for support.” The time for each rotation of the tip was somewhere less than two hours.

Gonolobus carolinensis, the angle pod, is not at all the sort of plant one would expect from a milkweed, yet it does belong in that family, the Asclepiadaceae. Close examination of the pod and the flower will reveal the usual milkweed characteristics. Gonolobus comes from the Greek gonia, an angle and lobus, a capsule. The flower, complete with corolla and the standard milkweed corona is a deep reddish-purple. Leaves are simple and opposite as is characteristic for the family, they are heart-shaped and slightly hairy. The fruit pod is covered with quite pronounced projections. Angle pod is another plant which likes alkaline soil and can be found sporadically on limestone banks and in rich thickets throughout the southern states.

Moonseed, Menispermum canadense, belongs in its own family, the Menispermaceae, all members of which are dioecious, that is, male and female parts occur in different flowers. The staminate flowers have 12-24 stamens, 6-8 short petals and 4-8 slightly longer sepals. Pistillate flowers have similar sepals and petals, and there are 2-4 pistils raised on a short common receptacle, (see detail on moonseed illustration). The fruit has a curious incurving growth pattern characteristic of the family, forming a crescent-shaped seed for which the plant is named (Greek men, moon and sperma, seed). Leaves are simple, palmately lobed and sometimes slightly peltate, that is, attached to the stalk by the lower surface. The vines grow luxuriously along stream banks and other rich moist habitats throughout the eastern United States. The fruits ripen in September, looking—but be warned, only looking like grapes, rich black with a fine “bloom.” They are, however, quite poisonous and fatalities have occasionally been reported in children. The easiest distinguishing feature is the single “new moon-shaped” seed in each fruit whereas grapes will have many, ovoid seeds; but if in doubt, steer clear of tasting.

When my English mother first came to visit me in Virginia, she went straight into the yard and started weeding. Since she is a very knowledgeable and successful gardener, I was happy to see her there, but was rather amused when she announced that she had carefully preserved the few pieces of honeysuckle she found and eradicated everything else! (She has learned our Virginia flora better now.) But, as I compared this with the feelings of my American mother-in-law, I decided that there was probably a compromise world between the two, a world in which we can live with, and enjoy our attractive vines without being totally overruled and strangled by the more aggressive ones!