



A small-fruited cucumber or gherkin and *Thunbergia*

# GROWING VEG AS ANNUAL CLIMBERS

Don't restrict yourself to ornamental climbing annuals, mix and match with attractive, productive plants, says Graham Strong





## PLANTS PROFILE

### Cover an eyesore

Bare fence lines and ugly outbuildings can be turned into productive spaces with a little imagination and clever choices of annual climbers.

For serious crop production, a solid wall of squashes or runner beans will be the order of the day, especially if the site gets plenty of sun, though with care, other decorative species such as sweet peas can be worked in, with little effect on the harvest.

### Gourds can be grand

Squashes, ornamental gourds and pumpkins, whether grown over tunnels and arches or up walls and fences need a solid support system, especially if you choose larger-fruited cultivars. Parallel wires will need strengthening with canes or sticks to offer more support and keep the wires apart. Raise plants under glass, hardening them off well, and don't plant out until early June, or when all danger of frosts has passed. Soil under walls can be poor so incorporate plenty of well rotted organic material before and after planting. Some initial tying-in of shoots may be necessary.

Water in dry spells, and liquid feed (seaweed-based ideally) once the fruits start to swell to encourage steady growth and impressive cropping. Harvest when fully ripe, before the first hard frost. Fruit give a hollow ring when tapped if ready to pick.

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Above and top:  
Ornamental gourds  
provide a rapid cover  
of an unsightly  
garage wall at RHS  
Garden Rosemoor.

Left: Cut leaves away  
from swelling fruits to  
encourage full  
ripening



## PLANTS PROFILE

### Fruit and flowers

Mix together climbing vegetables with ornamentals to make a feature out of a bare new fence. Even if you have permanent climbers already in place, quick-growing annuals can clothe the space in the first year or two before these mature. One secret of success is to match vigour. Nasturtiums, particularly in a wet season and on rich soil, can overwhelm less robust partners like climbing French beans with a blanket of outsized leaves. Squashes however, are quite capable of keeping pace with them. Variegated nasturtiums like the marbled leaves of *Tropaeolum majus* 'Jewel of Africa' tend to be more manageable; with some judicious leaf thinning, a sunny spot and meagre diet, they are particularly attractive and both leaves and flowers are edible.

### Support systems

The simplest way to support climbers on wooden structures is to use a staple gun to attach wide-mesh plastic pea and bean netting. A good tip to achieve even growth is to encourage leading shoots sideways, before they reach the top of the fence.

Maintenance includes picking off nasturtium leaves and flowers buds at the first sign of blackfly, cutting off badly mildewed squash leaves, and cutting sweet peas twice a week to encourage continuous blooms.

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Above and top: A mixture of squash, nasturtiums, sweet peas and morning glory have clothed this bare fence in just a few weeks.

Left: Squash will get off to a flying start if grown on to this sort of size before planting out after all risk of frost has passed



# Ideas for climbing veg



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## Climbing courgettes

Another gourd family member, courgettes will scramble upwards as happily as they trail over the ground. Yellow-fruited selections are particularly ornamental; pick fruit regularly to keep the plant productive and remove badly-mildewed leaves.



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## Gourd tunnel

The ornamental gourd tunnel, a quirky feature of RHS Garden Rosemoor. Squashes, pumpkins, even marrows can clothe flat-topped wooden pergolas or arched steel tunnels. Aim for 2.8m (8 ft) of headroom to avoid banging your head on hanging fruit!



GRAHAM STRONG

## Beans with sweet peas

Sweet peas will grow quite happily with runner bean 'Painted Lady'. Climbing French beans like handsome, purple podded 'Blauhilde' that are self pollinating will still have more impact paired with a robust pink sweet pea such as 'Alan Titchmarsh'.



JANE SEBIRE

## Mange tout and nasturtiums

Climbers can be even more spectacular given an unusual, even sculptural support like this flamboyant piece of curving, question mark woven willow. Even before flowering, mange tout peas and nasturtiums are vying for the heady heights.



TIM SANDALL

## Beans and canary creeper

Close kin to nasturtiums, *Tropaeolum peregrinum*, dubbed canary creeper for its yellow flowers, is well-behaved enough not to overwhelm a pair of beans with green and mottled purple pods. Deadheaded and picked often this could be a lasting relationship.



TIM SANDALL

## Sweet potatoes

*Ipomoea batatas* need a warm summer to produce a useful crop outdoors in the UK, but their morning glory foliage is attractive.



For more on annual climbers, read Graham Strong's feature in the April issue of *The Garden* 2010