

## Controlling Weedy Vines in the Landscape



Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: *Smilax*, or greenbriar, is one of several common vines that present problems for the gardener.

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Though some of them can be valuable sources of food for wildlife, native vines can also become real nuisances in the landscape. Among these troublesome vines are Virginia creeper, greenbriar (one of several species of *Smilax*), and briars such as blackberry or dewberry. Many of these vines can be hard to control if left unchecked. So it is much better to catch them while they are still relatively small.

Many people confuse Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) with poison ivy. They often grow intermingled in the woods, but they are two separate plants. The easiest way to tell these two vines apart is the leaves. Virginia creeper has five leaflets, while poison ivy has three. The five leaflets are four to six inches long and attached to a long petiole. In the fall, Virginia creeper leaves turn bright scarlet or maroon-red. Virginia creeper is not poisonous. However, because poison ivy often grows among Virginia creeper, the person who later breaks out from contact with poison ivy may mistakenly associate the rash with the Virginia creeper.

Greenbriar (*Smilax* spp.) is a widespread native vine in north Florida. There are many common names for greenbriar, including catbriar, cat sawbriar and sarsaparilla vine. With the exception of *Smilax pumila* (sarsaparilla vine), all species of *Smilax* are climbing vines. The leaves may be of various shapes, but are often ovate, or shaped like a fiddle or arrowhead with distinct lobes at the leaf base. Leaves are a very glossy green, smooth above, paler below, and from two to five inches long and one-half to four inches wide.

As a smilax plant begins to grow from seed, it sends up a single shoot and produces an underground bulb. As the plant matures, a very large cluster of bulbs is formed. Only a few

shoots will arise from the root mass; the majority of the bulbs lie dormant. If you kill one shoot, that bulb may die, but adjacent bulbs may send up shoots within a few days. Smilax grows very rapidly, seemingly sending up its long green shoots overnight.

There are numerous *Rubus* (blackberry and dewberry) species in the southeastern U.S., many of which are found in Florida. Dewberry has a low, vine-like growth habit and will rarely reach greater than two feet in height. Blackberry has a very upright growth pattern and will commonly reach three to six feet in height.

It is always easier to deal with these difficult weedy vines when they are young and small. One of the best ways to control them is to simply dig them up. Unfortunately, this may not always be possible. Many times they are intertwined with desirable shrubs.

Whenever possible, unravel the weedy vine from the desirable plant. As you do this, try to keep the vine intact and be careful not to break any of the stems of the desirable plant. Lay the vine on some bare ground or on a piece of plastic. Then you can spray it with a non-selective herbicide such as glyphosate (Roundup) or triclopyr (Brush-B-Gone). Be careful to avoid drift or contact of the spray solution with desirable foliage or bark. Allow the herbicide to stay on the plant for at least forty-eight hours before cutting the stem back to ground level. If the weedy vine attempts to regrow, and it probably will, spray or wipe the sprouts when they are six to eight inches high with a glyphosate solution.

If the weedy vine cannot be unraveled from the desirable shrub, cut the vine as close to the ground as possible. Immediately paint concentrated glyphosate or triclopyr on the cut stem.

Another option is to utilize a standard floral water pick with a cap. Fill the water pick with your herbicide, and snap on the cap. Cut the weedy vine, leaving about an eight to ten inch stem coming out of the ground. Jab the water pick into the ground next to the vine stem. Carefully bend the stem over and insert it into the water pick. Allow the vine to take up as much herbicide as it can.

Unless you have a very small yard, you are unlikely to ever totally eliminate all of these troublesome vines from your landscape. However, with diligence and with the attitude that it's just part of routine landscape maintenance, you will keep them from overgrowing everything.

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