

What is a Smilax vine?

Q: In the last year, smilax, cat briar, or blaspheme vine has become a real problem in my shrubs. Cutting the vines is only a very short relief, and the darn things seem immune to RoundUp. I want to kill them down to the bottom of the tuber. Suggestions?



Photo courtesy Hans Hillewaert

Smilax can be ornamental, but the thornier vines are more often just a nuisance.

A: Smilax is a vine exquisitely adapted to the South and our Southern gardening habits. If we could only find a way to make use of it ...

There are many species of smilax, and I can't help but point out that some varieties of smilax, particularly the nearly thornless Jackson vine, are not only quite ornamental, but also quite delicious (the young stems are exceptional, like a nutty asparagus). The small trailing smilax of longleaf woodlands (*Smilax pumila*) is one of the most graceful and ornamental groundcovers for Southern yards. And coral greenbrier (*Smilax walteri*) produces some of the most beautiful fruits of any Southern vine. Yes, honest to goodness, I treasure some of my smilax.

But there's no denying: The thornier smilax vines, the ones with the more-or-less heart-shaped leaves, can be a nuisance.

Once those leathery leaves harden off in spring, they won't absorb common foliar herbicides such as RoundUp. And while the very young and soft leaves are susceptible to herbicide in March and early April, it can be hard to get them to absorb enough herbicide to carry it into the thick, underground root system.

The only alternative herbicide treatment is one that essentially sterilizes the soil for ALL woody plants. In other words, if you used other types of herbicide, you'd kill your shrubs and trees along with your vines.

I'm sorry the universe is the cruel place that it is, but there you have it: There's no magic potion that will control smilax in the garden.

So I offer three suggestions:

1. Dig the root out. This is the least agreeable solution for large vines, since it can be very difficult to do, and you may destroy any nearby shrubs in the process. But if you catch the plants while young, you can often rip the root right out of the ground with a gloved hand.

2. Wear out the root system. Perhaps the most effective way to keep smilax out of your shrubs and trees is to prune it back to the ground as often as possible. This works better than you might imagine, as smilax needs a lot of light to survive. If you can keep a vine pruned back to the ground for most of the year, it will struggle mightily, and will eventually draw down all the reserves in that big root system. Smaller vines can much more quickly be controlled this way, so give your garden a regular inspection for smilax vines a couple of times a year, in early May and again in August.

3. Use the "long soak" herbicide application method in early spring. This takes some time, fiddling and patience, and has to be carefully timed, so it's not worth it unless you have a particularly large and annoying vine.

During the growing season, cut the vine back to the ground, and wait for the new growth to appear. When the vines have gotten some length on them, and while they are growing vigorously and still light green, mix a small batch of Roundup Super Concentrate with water, at about half the strength called for on the package directions (do NOT use any RoundUp product that has any active ingredient other than glyphosate, and do NOT make it stronger than the recommended directions, or this trick will backfire).

Add a teaspoonful of water-soluble fertilizer (such as Peters' or MiracleGro), mix it up, and then pour a couple of cups of the mix into a one-gallon plastic milk jug. Carry this contraption out to where the annoying vine is, and carefully thread the new vines into the milk jug, so that as much of the vine as possible is coated with the mixture. Set the jug carefully so it doesn't tip over, and leave it for a few days.

Remember that the RoundUp mixture will kill any plants that it touches, so avoid spilling it.

The long-soak method works well with many vines, and I expect it will kill or substantially weaken even the oldest, most troublesome vines.