



Homeowner Thyrza Whittemore builds a trellis for peas from apple-tree twigs pruned off in early spring.

# Branching Out

Traditional trellises made from twigs look at home in any backyard. Here's how one gardener makes her own—and how you can too

Gardeners need all the support they can get. There never seems to be enough time, after all, between spring's first green shoots and summer's skyward-climbing stems bent under the weight of heavy-headed peonies, ripe tomatoes, and plump pea pods. As any green thumb knows, many tall ornamentals and climbing edibles need something to lean on to keep them upright so that they're not rotting in moist soil.

Ever since colonial-era homesteaders wove wattle garden structures from unbranched shoots of willow or hazel

and set their peas to clamber over rows of tiny-twigged birch limbs, countless generations have used sticks to prop up their plants. Today, homeowners who want to combine beauty and utility can do the same. "Metal stakes and hoops may be practical," says Connecticut gardener Thyrza Whittemore, "but aesthetics are important, even in the vegetable garden." So she reaches for branches pruned in early spring—close at hand, easy to fashion to the right size, biodegradable, and free—to bring order to her beds. Read on to learn how she does it.

TEXT + PHOTOGRAPHS BY KAREN BUSSOLINI



Once the peas are finished, the trellis is handsome enough to stand on its own and sturdy enough to last a couple of seasons.



# HOW TO Build a diamond-patterned twig trellis for climbers

Collect fresh, straight hardwood cuttings about 1/2 inch in diameter. Flexible apple shoots are easiest to work with, but shrub willow or dogwood, maple, or sassafras sapling twigs can be used, or improvise with bamboo stakes from the garden center. For this 3-foot-high, 10-foot-long trellis, Thyrza used 60 sticks, 3 to 4 feet long, plus three thicker ones, 4 to 5 feet long (rebar or garden stakes can sub for these if need be).

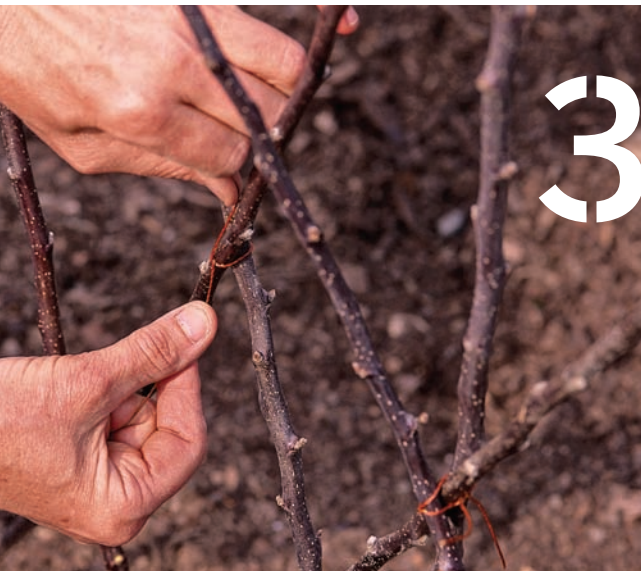
**1\_LAY OUT THE FRAMEWORK.** Sort sticks by length; use the longest ones first. Cut lightweight twine into a bunch of 5- to 6-inch lengths and set aside. Push support sticks straight into the ground, 6 inches deep, at each end of the trellis and in the middle. Fasten twine to the supports at either end, just above the ground, as a guide for keeping a straight line. Then cut measuring sticks, one 5 inches for spacing, one 3 feet as a height check.



**2\_SET THE FIRST DIAGONALS.** Center the 5-inch spacing guide on the middle support stick at its base. At each end of the guide, insert a stick diagonally into the ground at about a 60-degree angle, going about 3 inches deep. Keep the diagonals parallel to each other. Then, at the base of the first sticks, insert diagonals in the opposite direction, always crossing in front of the support stick.



**3\_WEAVE IN MORE STICKS, TIE THEM WHERE THEY CROSS.** Alternating sides and using the 5-inch spacer, add three more diagonals going in the first direction, then three in the other direction. Weave them in and out of each other at every other intersection. Tie the crossing sticks together at the bottom, middle, and top of the trellis. Keep working from the center out, adding weaving, and tying sticks. Finish by tying crossing sticks at both ends of the structure.



**homeowner tip**  
 THYRZA WHITTEMORE, MIDDLEBURY, CONN.  
 “For quantities of sticks, offer to pick up prunings from a local landscaper or orchardist in early spring. Their disposal problem could become your treasure trove.”



**4\_TRIM THE ENDS.** Stand back and take a good look at the trellis. Then adjust sticks and retie them as needed. For a neat finish, trim the twigs along the top of the trellis, using the 3-foot stick as a height guide, then clean up sticks at both ends for a clean line.



**5\_PLANT PEAS AND WATCH THEM CLIMB.** Thyrza plants shelling peas (shown here), snow peas, and sugar snaps along the length of the trellis. As the pea vines scramble up, wrapping tendrils around the twigs, they get optimum air circulation and sun exposure. Best of all, they're easy to pick.

# Beefing up twig supports

Rather than buy clunky peony hoops or ugly tomato cages, Thyrza Whittemore reinforces her twig garden structures with plastic-coated metal garden stakes, spray-painted brown (rusted rebar can also be used), for plants that need heavy lifting.

To keep the nodding heads of her 36- to 40-inch-tall ‘Festiva Maxima’ peonies upright (inset, below), Thyrza surrounds their bed with 3-foot metal stakes, driving them into the ground about 2 feet apart when the plants are 1 foot tall. Then she uses the stakes to secure twine that she runs in a grid through the bed, just below the flower heads, hiding it in the foliage; she adds another grid when the plants are 2 feet tall. “Take into account the height of your peonies so that the stakes don’t stick up above their heads like they’re in a corral,” she says. Apple-twig X’s tied to the outside of the stakes put a pretty face on the grid.

To give her tomatoes a sturdy framework, Thyrza builds them a four-legged tower (bottom). First, she drives 6-foot metal stakes into the ground in a 2 1/2-foot-sided square. Then she ties straight apple cuttings in big X’s

to the outside of the stakes and tops the tower with crossed arches made of bent twigs tied to the opposing stakes. Tomatoes ripen within easy reach.





## HOW TO Build a branch trellis in a pot

Thyrza uses dark-gray beech branches in big containers to support colorful sweet peas (or try growing other tender twiners, such as morning glories or black-eyed Susan vine). While any hardwood cuttings can be used, a beech's flat branching structure creates a conveniently tidy form. Sweet peas can reach 6 to 8 feet in height, so size branches accordingly.

# 1

### 1 PUT IN THE LARGEST SUPPORTS.

Insert four tall branches firmly around the edges of a container filled with rich potting soil. Beech branches are especially graceful, but any woody plants with lots of side branching—butterfly bushes, Japanese maples, birch, high-bush blueberries—can be used.



# 2



### 2 ADD SMALLER BRANCHES.

Insert smaller branches into the soil between each of the large ones. Any that are too short to meet at the top can be woven in. Make sure there are plenty of fine twigs for tendrils to grasp. Weave in or snip any that stick out.

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# 4



**4\_FILL IN.** Insert another round of little branches to fill in any holes. Tuck in, tie, or trim stray twigs on the inside, as needed. Plant sweet peas (or other vines). Thyrza also plants the center with lettuce, which fills the space quickly and can be harvested before the sweet peas take over.

# 3

### 3 TIE THE TOP.

Gather the tallest branches near their tops and tie them together with twine. Stand back and take a good look. Adjust the top if the whole structure leans. Tuck in any unruly branches or cut any outward-facing ones.



# 5



**5\_ENJOY THE SHOW.** Placed in a vegetable bed, a container of sweet peas adds summer-long color even as the edibles planted around it come and go. To keep the pot looking tidy as the plants climb up, just tuck in any stray shoots. Water frequently. Thyrza mixes moisture-retaining granules into the soil to help keep her pot from drying out. 🍷