

Some scrambling vines native to the eastern Darling Downs

August 2026



INTRODUCTION

Vines may be climbers or scramblers, depending on whether they have efficient means of climbing and objects to support them. *Peacehaven Botanical Facts* #6 has described some climbing vines native to the eastern Darling Downs; this fact sheet covers a few of the local scramblers.

Botanists recognise about 200 plant families worldwide. Of these, the leguminous (pod-fruited) family Fabaceae is one of the larger and more diverse. The family has almost 100 genera native to Australia, ranging from large trees such as *Castanospermum australe* (black bean), which can be up to 40 m tall, down to very small species, many of which grow to only 30–40 cm. Among these leguminous genera are scramblers native to the eastern Darling Downs. This fact sheet looks at three of these genera, and then at members of two other families.

HARDENBERGIA

***Hardenbergia violacea* (native sarsaparilla or hardenbergia)** is a perennial plant that is hard to miss in the bush when in full flower but quite cryptic when not showing off its wares. It often grows in rocky habitats, germinating and putting down its roots in pockets of soil and then scrambling out in many directions over rocks and gravel to enjoy unimpeded sunshine. In favourable conditions it can form a dense, showy carpet many metres across, crowding out other plants.

Hardenbergia violacea is abundant from Rockhampton to the Eyre Peninsula in South Australia, growing in coastal areas, highlands and on western slopes.

The simple leaves are leathery, 3–12 cm long by 1–4 cm wide, the apex obtuse to acute and the base usually cordate (i.e. with a notch where the petiole joins the leaf).

Flowering is mainly in late winter and early spring but can occur at any time of year. The flowers are violet, though occasionally white, and form attractive terminal panicles in optimal conditions. When the site is less favourable, flowering is sparser.

Sarsaparilla extracts, made from vines of the *Smilax* genus, have long been used in tropical regions of the world as cures for skin conditions and to relieve the pain of arthritis. Among interesting plant materials that early European seafarers brought to western

Europe, sarsaparilla was hailed as one of the many plant 'wonder drugs' of the day. Sarsaparilla drinks were sold in taverns, and advertisers trumpeted the benefits of a daily drink of sarsaparilla as a general pick-me-up. Chemical analysis has since backed up this claim, showing the active ingredient to be sarsasaponin, an anti-inflammatory alkaloid.

After the European settlement at Sydney was established, sarsaparilla became one of the many imported goods in demand. It was expensive, and people looked for cheaper, readily available local substitutes. *Hardenbergia violacea* was found to be among suitable sources, and a report in the *Maitland Mercury* of 20 October 1870 waxed lyrical about the curative properties of this 'lively' purple-flowered vine, which grew along the gravel embankments of the Great Northern Railway. A local industry was born.



Photo: Barbara McKenzie

Hardenbergia violacea in cultivation, scrambling on a tree stump



GLYCINE

The genus *Glycine* is one of the better known among the genera of Fabaceae native to Australia. *Glycine* species are usually purple-flowered like *Hardenbergia violacea* but can easily be distinguished by their compound leaves composed of three leaflets. The genus includes both annuals and perennials. Our native glycines are perennials.

There are 30–40 species of *Glycine* globally, about 25 Australia-wide and 7 in South East Queensland – though taxonomists have moved species in or out of genus and identified new species, so these numbers are subject to change.

Foremost among the annual species is soybean, *Glycine max*, the seed of which is the leguminous pulse with the highest global production for both human and animal consumption. Its critical importance as a foodstuff has directed scientists' attention to its relatives, including those native to Australia, as sources of genetic material and traits that may be needed for breeding to combat threats to soybean productivity.

Like other legumes, glycines have nodules in their roots that fix nitrogen from the atmosphere. This made them valuable components of the vast natural grasslands of the Darling Downs, providing a protein source for the mobs of native animals and then for the squatters' flocks of sheep. Fixing nitrogen made soils more fertile and increased productivity.

The most common native perennial glycines in South East Queensland are *Glycine clandestina* (twining glycine), *G. tabacina* (glycine pea), *G. tomentella* (woolly glycine), *G. microphylla* (small-leaved glycine) and *G. latifolia* (broad-leaved glycine). *G. latifolia* favoured the heavy soils of the Condamine Plain and is now less frequently seen.

***Glycine clandestina* (twining glycine)** differs from other local glycines in that its leaves are palmately trifoliate (i.e. the three leaves grow from a single point), whereas the others have pinnately trifoliate leaves. The stems are short and the leaves vary in shape but are generally within 1–8 cm long by 4–12 mm wide, with a sharp terminal point.

The flower racemes are 3–11 cm long and the purple, blue or pink pea flowers are about 5–6 mm across. Flowering is throughout the year. The pods are 12–40 mm long by 3–4 mm wide. All parts of the plant may be hairy to varying degrees.

C. clandestina has a wide distribution in eastern Australia in open dry grassland and on the edges of dry vine scrubs with varying soil types. There is a marked degree of variation between plants from different areas and several subspecies or variants have been identified. This species is easily overlooked in the field, hence *clandestina* (clandestine, secret, undercover).

***Glycine tabacina* (glycine pea)** is also widespread, but rarely flowers in winter. Its leaves are pinnately trifoliate, with leaflets 1.5–6 cm long by 1–3.5 cm wide and the terminal leaflet usually larger or longer than the two laterals.

The racemes can be up to 20 cm long with the flowers about 6 mm across. The pods are 14–30 mm by about 3 mm.

This species favours grasslands within open forest and woodlands. Somewhat surprisingly, it has been introduced to China, Taiwan and some tropical countries for use in herbal medicine and research. It is reputed to have anti-inflammatory properties useful in ameliorating the pain of arthritis.

***Glycine tomentella* (woolly glycine)**, as its name suggests, is hairy on the stem, leaves and pods. Its leaves are pinnately trifoliate, the leaflets 1–6 cm by 4–30 mm and the terminal leaflet usually larger than the others. All leaflets are usually hairy on both surfaces.



Photo: Patricia Gardner

Glycine clandestina



The racemes of *G. tomentella*, at 5–8 cm in length, are shorter than those of the previous two species but are up to three times as long as the leaves. The purple flowers are about 5 mm across and the pods are 12–20 mm by about 3 mm. Flowering is throughout the year.

This species is seen in grasslands within woodlands.

***Glycine microphylla* (small-leaved glycine)** appears to thrive in less fertile soils than those favoured by the other *Glycine* species discussed here. It grows on the soils of the shales and metamorphic rocks of the Great Dividing Range and surrounding areas, which are usually less fertile than the loams and black earths of the plains.

The leaves are 1.5–5 cm long by 1–6 mm wide and weakly hairy. The racemes, twice as long as the leaves, bear 5–13 purple to pinkish flowers. The pods are linear and 1.5–2.8 cm by 2–4 mm.



Glycine microphylla

Photo: Patricia Gardner

This plant prefers the semi-shade of woodlands and scrub edges to the bright sunlight of grasslands.

G. microphylla flowers throughout the year.

KENNEDIA

Only two species of *Kennedia* are found in South East Queensland, out of about 15 species Australia-wide.

***Kennedia rubicunda* (dusky coral pea, red Kennedy pea)** is a perennial thin-stemmed vine that can scramble over a large area. The stems are usually downy.

The leaves are pinnately trifoliate and variably ovate, 3–10 cm long by 2–5 cm wide, and may be downy on both sides.

K. rubicunda flowers mainly in late winter to spring. The flowers are borne on a raceme and are dark red in colour, 2–4 cm across, with the large upper petal bent back at right-angles. The pods are 7–10 cm by about 1 cm and are usually covered with silky hairs.

This species grows in a variety of habitats including open forests, the edges of scrubs, on roadsides and embankments, in gullies and on creek banks.



Photo: Patricia Gardner

Kennedia rubicunda

ASPHODELACEAE AND ASPARAGACEAE

Until 2016, the genera *Geitonoplesium* and *Eustrephus* were both classified as members of the Philesiaceae and were the only two members of that family native to Australia. Recent taxonomic work has resulted in their both being transferred to different families.

***Geitonoplesium cymosum* (scrambling lily)** is now seen as belonging to the Asphodelaceae, a family of herbs, shrubs and vines comprising almost 1000 species globally. In Australia, the family includes the genus *Xanthorrhoea* (grass trees) and the flax lilies.

The thin, wiry stems of *G. cymosum* can grow to about 8 m in length and thicken markedly as the plant ages. The plant can form dense patches in favourable locations such as moist hardwood forests, rocky moist gullies and open patches in softwood scrubs.

Its leaves are variable in shape, 1.5–13 cm by 0.2–4 cm, with a raised midvein and the apex usually pointed.

The flowers are brilliant white, usually with green tips to the petals. The fruits are yellow to orange and roughly spherical, 0.7–2 cm in diameter, and the seeds are black. The pedicels are 5–10 mm long.

***Eustrephus latifolius* (wombat berry)** was transferred to the Asparagaceae, the asparagus family, which in Australia includes the genera *Asparagus* (one native species), *Cordyline* and *Lomandra*. Other plants of this family commonly seen in Australia are the introduced *Yucca* and *Agave* species. Asparagaceae now includes plants of widely varying forms, which are, however,



Photo: Patricia Gardner

Geitonoplesium cymosum

connected by genetic and evolutionary relationships. The family includes about 150 genera and 2500 species globally and about 30 genera and 180 species in Australia.

Wombat berry is a much-branched scrambler with thin wiry stems. It grows over and around rocks, logs and small plants in open forest and the edges of scrubs. It is often seen on exposed banks where the soil is well drained and the plant has access to light.

The leaves are 3–12 cm long by 0.2–5 cm wide, varying in shape from ovate to lanceolate or linear. Several veins are conspicuous on the underside.

The hairy petals of the flowers are white or pale pink, about 5 mm across. The globose fruits are yellow to orange in colour, 1–2 cm in diameter, and the seeds are black. The species flowers in spring and summer, and the fruits are retained into the winter, when the seed is released.



Photo: Diana Beal

Eustrephus latifolius