



It's spring time... Wisteria, renowned for its truly gorgeous display, has come to life in our gardens. Its tassel-like flowers, usually in shades of rich mauve purple, drape dramatically over pergolas, veranda posts, arches etc. while its branches twist and tangle until they're enmeshed with the structure they're climbing. There are 10 species in the genus, most native to China and Japan (two are native to North America). Our 'Blue Mountains' wisteria are mostly of the mauve Japanese or Chinese species, and there are cultivars with different flower colours, white, pink to dark purple, some have a greater abundance of flowers, some have longer racemes, some have double flowers, and some have a more powerful fragrance.

Basically, there are four main types of wisteria in Australian gardens:

Chinese wisteria (*wisteria sinensis*) is the most frequently seen; with colours ranging from lavender blue to white, spray of flowers up to 30cm long appear in spring on bare branches before the new foliage of a limey green colour bursts through. There are varieties with longer flower tresses as well as varieties with double flowers, highly fragrant and dark purplish-blue colour.

Japanese wisteria (*wisteria floribunda*): If you love the sight of a heavily flower-clad arbour then go for the Japanese species. In fact, the name 'floribunda' literally translates to 'an abundance of flowers'. This species is one of the most spectacular of all wisterias and can grow up to 9m high. Its pink, lavender, purple, white flower racemes hang down 40 to 100cm and look spectacular on a pergola where they can be viewed from below. Dwarf varieties are available which will help contain wayward growth in smaller gardens.

The lightly scented flowers of **Silky wisteria** (*wisteria brachybotrys*) have slightly larger petals than other varieties and can thrive in both full-sun and part-shade environments. The plant boasts deep green leaves with long racemes of scented flowers with yellow markings on petals. It flowers in late spring/early summer, sometimes spot flowers again during autumn.

Wisteria frutescens is better known by its brand name 'Amethyst Fall'. Unlike other species of wisteria which originate in Asia, this species is native to the eastern of the USA. This type is great for smaller gardens as it is not as invasive and does not require constant pruning.

Is wisteria an invasive plant?

One of the reasons gardeners often hesitate to plant wisteria is that it can be difficult to contain. True enough, the plant is a fast and aggressive grower, it will work its way into any crook or cranny it can reach. Left unsupported, it can grow into a mound but is at its best when allowed to clamber up a tree, a wall, or other supporting structure; whatever the case, the support must be very sturdy, because mature wisteria can become very strong with heavy wrist-thick trunks and stems; these can collapse latticework, crush thin wooden posts, and even strangle large trees. Wisteria planted near houses can cause damage to gutters, downspouts, and similar structures. We need to understand that botanically, vines are designed to climb, it's in their nature to be aggressive, spinning and twining their stems through bushes, scrub and trees, trying to get above any competitive foliage; the only way to stop them running amok is by regularly take the secateurs to them, grow them where they can be reached from all sides, train them flat on a wall or as a standard, trim them as needed when new shoots develop, after flowering, trim off the spent flower shoots so they do not develop into seed pods... and watch out for any rampant and wayward growth!

Wisteria can actually be maintained as a large shrub or a free-standing plant (properly known as a standard) by pruning it back hard at the end of every season and keeping wayward shoots in check, as unlike most climbers, the vine is very woody and can develop a true trunk with age. A free-standing wisteria or a bonsai wisteria tree/tub makes for a very impressive specimen. The two species normally seen as bonsai are Japanese wisteria and Chinese wisteria. Both are twining climbers; a common



Bonsai tree and bonsai pot



Wisteria trained as a free-standing plant

way to differentiate between them is to study the way that the plant has twinned. The Chinese wisteria will grow anti-clockwise whilst the Japanese wisteria twines clock-wise.

Propagation is via hardwood cutting, softwood cuttings, or seed. However, specimens grown from seed can take decades to bloom; and they may not be identical to the parent plant.

Wondering how to tell the difference between the Asian and North American species? Asian wisteria are aggressive growers with fuzzy seed pods, while North American wisteria are not quite as aggressive and have smooth seed pods, as well as more-or-less cylindrical, bean-shaped seeds. Another difference is that American's flowers appear after the plant has 'leafed' out in late spring, whereas the Chinese/Japanese's blooms appear before its foliage.

Note: Plant wisteria with caution. All parts of the plant are toxic to pets, livestock, and humans.