community conservation in action

NVT's vine management advice



Rudi Swart, Giorgio Lombardi

Forest & Urban Programmes

2/19/2026

Background to the flora of Nature's Valley

Nature's Valley lies within the coastal forest / thicket biome, with interspersed fynbos vegetation. With the start of more formal development within the valley, natural fires have been suppressed and will continue to be suppressed to prevent loss of property and lives. The ecological implications are that areas historically under fynbos vegetation (i.e., Fynbos reserve, Phyl Martin Park) will slowly shift towards coastal forest / thicket vegetation at the expense of fynbos, the latter which requires fire at regular intervals to remain viable and not become moribund.

Surrounding the village, are massive sources of seeds of indigenous forest species. These get transported by wind and animals, notably birds, but also baboons, bushpigs, rodents and other mammals. In gardens, if not actively kept open, we see a relatively fast transition towards coastal thicket / forest vegetation which naturally establishes. Typical tree species in Nature's Valley are candlewood (*Pterocelastrus tricuspidatus*), milkwood (*Sideroxylon inerme*), pock ironwood (*Chionanthus foveolatus*), white pear (*Apodytes dimidiata*), forest currant (*Searsia chirindensis*), coastal camphor (*Tarchonanthus littoralis*) and glossy currant (*Searsia lucida*). Many other species are also naturally found in the village.

A concern of many valley residents are climbers, or creepers / vines, that are claimed to choke out native trees, or smother indigenous plants. Often, from a human perspective, these climbing plants are aesthetically unattractive, causing trees to grow 'skew' as opposed to 'straight', creating dense woody clumps and shading out other plants on our properties. Many valley residents see climbers as necessarily bad for their gardens and want to get rid of these plants. NVT has had countless complaints also about the forest grape (*Rhoicissus tomentosa*) plants at the bottom of Kalanderkloof, that seems to smother native forest plant diversity.

At NVT, we take the concerns of valley residents seriously. We also have the responsibility to provide an ecological perspective on these climbers. In Nature's Valley, we have *at least* five species of indigenous climbers (Table 1). These species are entirely natural in their occurrence, and have a role to play in the general ecology of the landscape, outlined below.

- **Structural complexity and habitat**

  Vines add vertical and horizontal complexity to forests, creating pathways and refuges for animals. They form aerial corridors used by arboreal mammals, reptiles, and insects, and provide nesting and shelter sites for birds. This structural complexity increases overall biodiversity.

- **Food resources**

  Many creepers and vines produce abundant flowers, fruits, and young leaves. These are key food sources for insects, birds, bats, and primates, particularly during periods when trees are not fruiting. In some forests, lianas are critical in maintaining year-round food availability.

- **Canopy connectivity**

  By linking tree crowns, vines increase canopy connectivity, allowing animals to move between trees without descending to the forest floor. This reduces predation risk and facilitates foraging and dispersal.

- **Forest regeneration and succession**

  Creepers often colonise gaps rapidly after disturbance. They stabilise microclimates by shading the forest floor, reducing temperature extremes and moisture loss. Some vines protect young trees from herbivory or wind, indirectly aiding regeneration.

- **Soil protection and nutrient cycling**

  Ground-creeping vines protect soil from erosion by intercepting rainfall and binding the soil surface. Their leaf litter contributes to nutrient cycling, and some species (particularly legumes like the Cape Sweet Pea) add nitrogen to forest soils.

- **Pollination and ecological interactions**

  Vines frequently have specialised relationships with pollinators such as bees, moths, birds, and bats. They therefore support pollinator diversity and resilience, which benefits the wider forest community.

- **Resilience to disturbance**

  In disturbed or fragmented forests, vines often persist or recover quickly. This helps maintain ecological functions, such as food supply and habitat, while slower-growing trees re-establish.

- **Damage to trees**

  Creepers and climbers generally do not smother or kill healthy trees. Most species use trees purely for structural support and do not extract nutrients from them. In intact forests, tree mortality is rarely caused directly by climbers; rather, climbers may increase mechanical stress or competition for light in already weakened, suppressed, or damaged trees. Climbers **do not parasitise** trees (unlike mistletoes in their early stages). Negative effects are **context-dependent**: high vine loads can increase windthrow risk or slow tree growth, particularly in disturbed forests or forest edges. In **healthy, closed-canopy forests**, vine densities are usually regulated by shade, herbivory, and natural disturbance regimes.

Valley residents are advised to caution against blanket clearing of climbers and instead follow a more ecologically sensitive approach. If a garden or natural area is heavily covered by climbers, selective thinning of vines or branches can be applied rather than removing entire plants. Thinning can be done strategically, for example, around established saplings beneath creepers, to allow sufficient sunlight to reach young trees without removing the ecological benefits that climbers provide.

Residents are encouraged to first identify climber species before intervention (Table 1 and images below), as many indigenous vines support birds, insects, and pollinators, while a few invasive species may require more active management. Cutting should be minimal and targeted, focusing on reducing excessive weight or shading rather than clearing climbers entirely. Where possible, pruning should be done outside peak flowering or fruiting periods to avoid disrupting wildlife.

In sensitive or steep areas, retaining ground-creeping vines is recommended, as they help stabilise soil and reduce erosion. Any removed material should be mulched or composted on site where appropriate, returning nutrients to the soil. By adopting a selective and informed approach, residents can maintain garden safety and plant health while supporting biodiversity and forest resilience.

Table 1: Summary of the dominant climbers found in Nature's Valley

Species	English name	Afrikaans name	Notes
Dipogon lignosus	Cape Sweet Pea	Bosklimop	Delicate and beautiful plant with pink, showy flowers. Used in horticulture.
Delairea odorata	Cape Ivy	Kaapse klimop	Herbaceous plant growing up to 3m tall, producing sweet-scented yellow flowers.
Cynanchum obtusifolium	Monkey rope	Bostou	Creeper with a woody base, climbing to 3m. Contains a milky sap. Produces white-green flowers which attracts insects.
Gymnosporia nemorosa	Forest spikethorn	Bospendoring	Although not a typical creeper, the growth form of forest spikethorn often becomes that of a typical climber, creating a tangled, woody clump with branches becoming vine-like, albeit very woody.
Rhoicissus tomentosa	Forest grape	Bosdruif	Woody climber able to reach 20m tall trees. Small creamy green flowers attract many insect species. Fruits are edible and pleasant tasting, and a favourite of baboons and birds. **Common in Kalanderkloof**.
Rhoicissus digitata	Baboon grape	Bobbejaandruif	Woody climber with a possible spread of 10-15m. From the Western Cape to Mozambique. Flowers attract bees and wasps. Fruits are eaten by birds and mammals, and tubers are eaten by bushpigs.



Figure 1: Dipogon lignosus, or Cape Sweet Pea



Figure 2: Delairea oborata, or Cape Ivy



Figure 3: Cynanchum obtusifolium, or Monkey Rope



Figure 4: Gymnosporia nemorosa, or Forest Spikethorn



Figure 5: Rhoicissus tomentosa, or Forest Grape



Figure 6: Rhoicissus digitata, or Baboon Grape