

As I journey along the path of life, I have been fortunate to meet many wonderful people. Each encounter has influenced my life in some way. Many of these people are what I'd call acquaintances, yet there are those I'm honored to call "friend." On our deck is a plaque, given to us by friends, that says, "A friend is God's way of saying he doesn't want us to walk alone."

Some friends have briefly shared my walk down this path of life, while others have stayed close year after year.



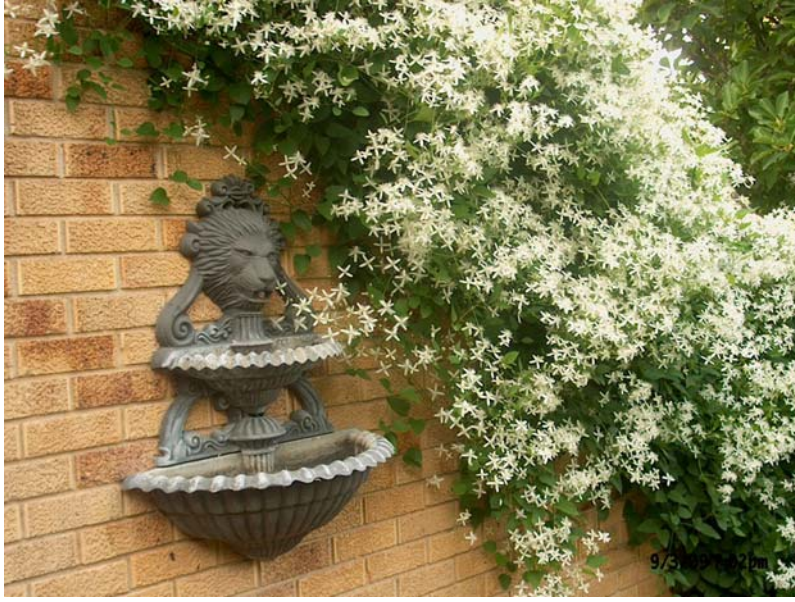
Recently, while mowing the lawn, I was captivated by our beautiful blooming vine called *Clematis terniflora*, more commonly referred to as sweet autumn clematis. The vine currently graces one corner of our garage. This particular vine was given to us a number of years ago by friends who moved away from Minden.

For years, having lived only a few houses from these friends, I deeply admired the vine blooming on their chain link fence. When late summer arrived, the vine would totally cover their fence, sprawling nearly thirty to forty feet, adorning it with thousands of brilliant, dainty, white flowers, each emitting a heavenly aroma. While standing a good distance from the vine, one could easily catch its intoxicating scent and readily hear the humming sound created by multitudes of bees visiting those inviting flowers. Every year, I would comment on how much I admired and enjoyed its splendor.



When the time came for Marsh and Carole to move, they asked me if I'd like to have the vine. With a grateful and resounding yes, I was thrilled to be able to successfully lift and transplant it to our backyard.

It's been nearly fifteen years since I moved that magnificent specimen to our yard. Sadly, it's been nearly three and one-half years ago that my good friend Marsh Beck died. Our friendship spanned over four decades. Marsh was one of those friends, even in the latter years when miles separated us, with whom I could pick up a conversation as if we were still living next door to one another.



Generally, when this vine finishes blooming, I cut it back to prevent it from going to seed. If allowed to produce seed, sweet autumn clematis can be somewhat invasive. I must admit the seed pods themselves are very attractive, and they do create a great food source for birds during the winter months. Occasionally, when I do allow it to produce seed, in the spring I

frequently will find new little plants sprouting throughout the yard.

Four or five years ago, I allowed one of these volunteers to grow beneath our lilac shrub. During the summer months, this vine climbs to the top of the shrub, completely covers it, and it too is ablaze.

Over the years I have shared many of these volunteers with other friends. As a matter of fact, shortly after Marsh and Carole moved away, I returned a little offspring to them to plant in their new surroundings. I often refer to these little plants as friendship plants. After all, I received the original from friends.

Today, as our sweet autumn clematis is in full bloom, exquisite and exciting, I am reminded of my good friend Marsh.

I can only imagine with all those other little friendship plants that I've given away; they too must be in full bloom, rewarding others with their loveliness. Let them also be a reminder of how valuable friends are as we make our way along the path of life.