

## Whacking Clematis in Summer

By Laura Watson

Clematis can be daunting plants almost any time of year, but especially in summer when some succumb to clematis wilt, while others throw new vines fast and furiously everywhere, including where they are not wanted. Still others have leaves that scorch and burn in Seattle's August heat.

### The Dreaded Clematis Wilt

Clematis wilt is a dastardly disease (well, fungus, actually) that tends to cause some of those large and lovely jaw-dropping clematis that bloom in May and June to collapse as though they were cut but not put in water. To make matters even worse, this often happens just as the first bloom of the season is about to open. Heart-breaking! The clematis wilt fungus enters through tiny cracks in the vines, either at the crown level or somewhere higher up on one or more of the vines of the plant. When this happens, cut the plant back to below the damage and dispose of the refuse in the yard waste. The good news about the wilt is that only the big- blossomed May-June bloomers are prone to it. So, to avoid clematis wilt, just be sure to plant clematis that bloom in early spring (*C. armandii*, *C. montana*, and *C. alpina* progeny, for example) or clematis that bloom between July and September (like *C. Jackmannii*, *C. Betty Corning*, or *C. Princess Diana*). The other good news about clematis wilt is that it tends to be a juvenile disease, so if you can harden your heart and suffer through a year or three of clematis wilt, your plant may very well grow out of it!

Last summer, I had two striking examples of the wilt. *C. Vancouver Morning Mist* wilted in June for the FOURTH year in a row. I only saw one blossom in the entire four years this plant grew in my garden. Hrmph. I cut it back to the ground and informed the culprit, while shaking my finger at what was left of it, that my patience was gone. In the fall, it would be OUTA HERE! Then later on an August morning, I noticed something pink out of the corner of my eye, beckoning me over by the entry path. Good gracious! It was *C. Vancouver Morning Mist* opening the first of what turned out to be seven big blossoms. I must have scared the living daylights out of it (or maybe it had finally matured enough to withstand the disease)! I guess I'll keep it—well, depending on what it does this spring.

My new young *C. Tartu* (with lovely large ruffled lilac blossoms in spring) also succumbed to the wilt last June, in this case for the first time, just as the very first flower bud was ready to open. I whacked it all the way back, a very disappointing loss, especially since it was planted in a new ceramic pot by the patio. But like *C. Vancouver Morning Mist*, this one grew back quickly and actually had several blooms in August. I hope it has toughened up enough to withstand the wilt this spring.

## **Just Plain Ugly**

August in normal years here in Seattle is usually a difficult month for clematis because of heat and drought, but last summer was our hottest summer on record, with very little rain to boot. OK, OK, so some people loved it—but not me or my clem. I'm learning the hard way that most clematis do NOT like really hot dry weather. Many of mine took a snit and slowed down or stopped flowering altogether, AND developed unsightly crispy brown or spotted leaves. Hrmph, not an alluring effect.

C. Duchess of Edinburgh is a case in point. This beautiful clematis with big double white blossoms had one woody stem with no flowers and scorched ugly leaves. I just couldn't take it. Even though I feared I might seriously set the clematis back, I chopped it to about six inches in early August. It shares a pot with a great-looking, heat-loving Chilean Glory Vine (probably a little crowded in there), so I didn't miss the clematis much. Much to my surprise, C. Duchess of Edinburgh came back FAST with big fresh new leaves—and a bit later with several big fat buds! The blooms were not the round puffy double ones of spring, but they were lovely large pristine white blooms that looked great with all the greenery. I suspect that clematis leaves grown in the cool moisture of Seattle's spring and early summer just aren't programmed to take our hot dry summers. But in my experience (especially last summer) leaves that come into being during the heat of summer look great and seem to handle hot and dry just fine.

## **Throwing Vines in the Wrong Places**

Most clematis love to grow, and they aim for the sun. But sometimes they send lusty vines into places you would rather they not be, like up into your delicate young tree or all over the pathway or smothering a choice perennial. No problem, just whack the offending vines off when you notice them. The more obedient stems will continue growing and blooming in the places you let them. Always remember that you are the boss.

## **Special Case: C. recta purpurea**

This clematis, a non-climber that has vines about 6' long, has the most beautiful rich purple foliage in the spring. Then it blooms wonderfully in June with small fragrant white flowers. As sometimes happens with plants that have dark leaves in spring, the leaves turn more greenish as they age. Having heard somewhere that cutting this plant back to the ground would generate a second showing of those luscious purple leaves, I pruned it to the ground after it had finished blooming in late June or early July. It quickly grew a new clump of lush purple leaves, as expected. Then, to my surprise, it also bloomed again in August almost as vigorously as it had in June!

## **The Problem with C. Gipsy Queen**

C. Gipsy Queen, which has stunning deep-purple velvety flowers with reddish overtones, is one clematis I personally can't be without. It has the additional bonus of beginning a six-week period of bloom in late July or early August when most other clematis have already dwindled.

Ever since I planted mine ten years ago, it has bloomed its heart out, year after year—until this year, that is. Imagine my dismay one August morning when I discovered that more than half of the blossoms on my plant looked wilted. Heartache! I knew that C. Gipsy Queen was not prone to clematis wilt, so I followed one of the wilted branches back to the ground and discovered a large old woody base that was the source of all the branches with wilted flowers. This dried up junction seemed to be no longer able to support the branches that were depending on it. I pulled all those vines out and tossed them. What was left was a shadow of its former self. I can only hope that the mature root system of this plant will generate new vines next spring that will again create the large and gorgeous show of blossoms that I love. I guess the take-home lesson here is that we may occasionally need to rejuvenate older plants by cutting out large old woody canesto the base. A couple of venerable clematis in my garden may need major surgery this year.

## **Lesson Learned**

During our difficult Seattle summer last year, my clematis taught me some good lessons in whacking back. If a clematis wilts, has scorched leaves, is sending vines into the wrong place, or is looking just plain ugly, go ahead and whack it back! It may well come rushing back and bloom again later in the very same year.