

The Pleasures of Growing Clematis

By Laura Watson

Clematis are known as the Queen of Climbers because they are so gorgeous. The flowers come in countless colors and many forms, including the large open blooms we so often associate with clematis. But there are many other charming forms, too—doubles, semi-doubles, bells, small dogwood-like flowers, tulip-shaped blossoms, and stars. The blooms range from 10 inches in diameter to sweet little species flowers that are only one or two inches wide. The plants can grow to many different sizes—from huge vines that climb 80-foot cedars to tiny little ground covers, and everything in-between. One particularly appealing attribute of clematis is that they can make spectacular use of vertical space, a gardening aspect so easily overlooked.



C. 'NELLY MOSER'

Why Some People Avoid Them

Clematis are reputed to be difficult to grow and to control. With a little knowledge, though, this just isn't true. Clematis are unfortunately not drought tolerant. They also do not provide instant gratification because they take time to settle in and provide their astonishing display—usually about three years. But then, given enough moisture, they will bloom year in and year out for 50 years and longer. Some clematis are prone to a fungus disease called clematis wilt, but many beautiful clematis

do not get this disease at all.

Clematis wilt (which causes a sudden and heart-breaking collapse, as if the vine were picked but not put in water) is usually a juvenile disease, so even those that get the wilt usually grow out of it.

Many clematis are unattractive in the winter, a problem managed either by planting them where they won't be seen much in winter or by planting clematis that can be cut back hard in the fall (see Pruning Group C below). Of course, the biggest bugaboo about clematis is confusion about how to prune them, which I will attempt to elucidate here.

Planting and Growing

A wide variety of clematis are available at many good local nurseries. When purchasing a clematis, always choose the largest plant you can find and make sure it has multiple stems growing at the base. Most clematis prefer sun, though many will also grow in shade. Find out, either from the plant tag or from a little research, how much sun your clematis needs. Once a spot has been chosen, dig as big a hole as possible, preferably at least twice as deep and twice as wide as the pot. Add lots of compost and a little bone meal and, with the exception of some of the species clematis, plant the clematis with the crown at least two inches below the soil level—this encourages multiple stems, which can boost the longevity of a clematis. Water it in and provide some sort of structure with skinny bits for the leaf stems, or petioles, of the vine to cling to—like string, wire, or the branches of trees and

shrubs. Now for the hardest part—cut the newly planted clematis back to 12 inches, to further encourage multiple stems. Once the vine begins to grow, twiddle the tender growing stems into the structure provided (*twiddle* is a highly technical term for weaving and fiddling the tender ends of fast-growing vines into their support with your fingers). Then, sit back and wait for the show!

Pruning Clematis

Clematis are almost universally divided into three pruning groups, Pruning Groups A, B, and C (1, 2, and 3 in Europe). Most clematis sold in nurseries have tags that actually provide this information. But what if pruning-group information is not available? Easy! Check the website, *Clematis on the Web* (just Google it), which provides information for thousands of clematis, by name, including pruning-group information, as well as sun/shade requirements. Alternatively, by paying attention to when a clematis blooms, one can easily identify the pruning group using the criteria below.

Pruning Group A: Spring-Blooming Small-Flowered Clematis

The clematis in this group are small flowered, though many of them are large plants. They bloom between March and May on last year's growth. Alpinas and macropetalas in this group are easy to grow, undemanding, hardy, and ideally suited to partial shade. They generally grow between 6 and 12 feet tall and bloom in mid spring, sometimes repeat blooming in late summer. The bell-shaped flowers gradually morph into attractive fluffy seed heads.

Pruning Group A also includes the dogwood- flowered montanas (many with a lovely vanilla scent) and the armandiis (a.k.a., the evergreen or leather-leaf clematis). Flowering freely starting early-to-mid spring, both montanas and armandiis are vigorous growers, reaching up to 25 feet and more, and can take more sun than alpinas and macropetalas. Many, though not all, are fragrant. While not strongly hardy, these clematis do well in the Pacific Northwest, especially when grown in a warm sheltered position against a wall or on a tall support like a tree.

Pruning Group A clematis do not require an annual pruning. However, because these plants are inclined to be large, they will eventually need some control, especially in smaller gardens. If maximizing blooms for next year is important, the best time to prune them is shortly after blooming. The plants will then have the summer and fall to set new buds for next year. But if losing blooms for one year is not a big deal, prune them any time. Pruning almost never kills a clematis. If a clematis sends stems into places it shouldn't, just cut the offending growth back. If, on the other hand, the plant has gotten huge, tangled, and out of control, cut the whole plant way back.

Alternatively, if the plant can be separated into two parts, consider cutting half the plant back one year and the other half the next year. These methods also work for overgrown Pruning-Group-B clematis (see below).

Pruning Group B: Large-Flowered Hybrids Blooming April – June

Large-flowered clematis begin blooming

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between late April and early June on the previous year's growth. Many will repeat bloom in late summer or fall on new wood, though not as vigorously as in spring. These are the clematis with heart- stopping, jaw-dropping flowers. Each bloom can be huge, ranging from 5 – 10 inches in diameter, on vines that grow 6 – 12 feet tall. The downside is that they are unattractive in winter with dead brown leaves (that can't be pruned until spring) and, even worse, they are susceptible to the dreaded clematis wilt. If the dead brown leaves are distressing in winter, they can be individually removed with clippers—if the plant is not too large, that is.

Pruning Group B clematis should be pruned just as the new growth begins. When pruning in spring, start at the top of each stem, cutting back to a healthy green bud, and snip off all the small side branches, most of which are dead leaf stems. The plant will be more showy if the individual vines are spread out and tied onto a support before they begin their rapid growth. If necessary, these plants can take radical renovation as described above for Pruning Group A.

Pruning Group C: Large- and Small- Flowered Clematis Blooming from Late June through Fall

The cultivars in Pruning Group C have their main crop of blossoms in the summer on new wood and often repeat flower in late summer and autumn. Flowers are 2 – 7 inches in diameter with stems that grow from 6 – 15 feet tall. Many have slightly nodding bell-shaped flowers; others have open flat flowers similar to the clematis in

Pruning Group B. Thankfully, these clematis are **not** prone to clematis wilt. They are excellent for all types of garden supports and fences or for growing through shrubs, roses, and into small trees, adorning their hosts with abundant blossoms, sometimes with hundreds of flowers at once during the summer and fall.

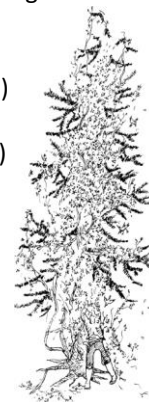
Clematis in Pruning Group C are by far the most satisfying to grow and the easiest to prune.

Pruning is a cinch. Any time between late fall and early spring, just gather up the stems near the ground in one hand—like gathering hair for a pony tail—and use clippers in the other hand to cut the stems off all at once to one-to-three feet high! A very large plant may require several pony tails.

The result is no dead leaves to look at, no fiddly pruning to do, no chance for the plant to become huge and out of control.

Some of the best and easiest to grow of the Pruning Group C clematis are also relatively easy to find:

- C. 'Betty Corning' (mauve bell-shaped fragrant blooms)
- C. 'Comtesse du Bouchaud' (pink flowers)
- C. 'Etoile Violette' (deep-violet flowers)
- C. 'Huldine' (pristine white flowers)
- C. 'Jackmanii' (dark violet-blue flowers)
- C. 'Kermesina' (deep red flowers)
- C. 'Madame Julia Correvon' (red flowers)
- C. 'Polish Spirit' (violet flowers)
- C. *tangutica* 'Bill MacKensie' (yellow flowers followed by large fluffy seedheads)
- C. 'Venosa Violacea' (white with violet veining)



Clematis dragnet

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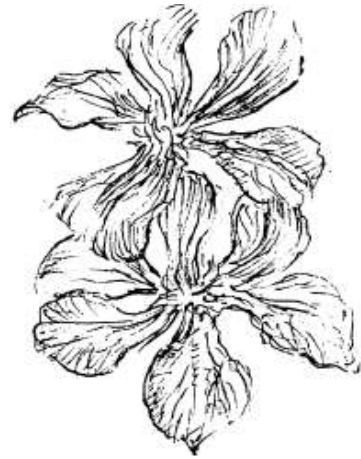


C. 'EVENING STAR'

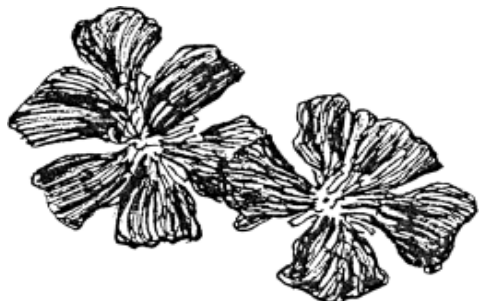
Because it climbs
on a lattice,
the Hoi polloi say
"clem-at'-is"

But Webster will not
cease to hiss,
Until they call it
"clem'-a-tis"

-J.E. Springarn, 1930



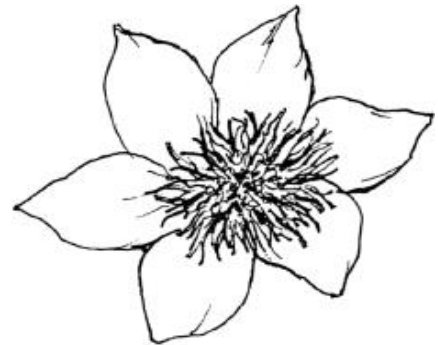
C. 'MARGOT KOSTER'



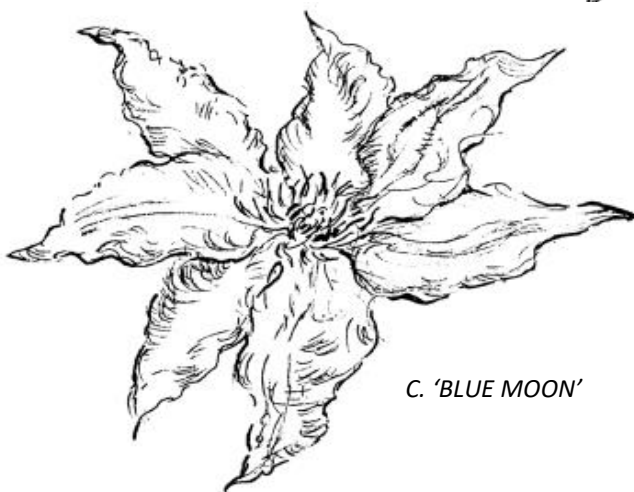
C. 'ETOILE VIOLETTE'



*C. ALPINA
'HELSINGBORG'*



C. FLORIDA 'SIEBOLDII'



C. 'BLUE MOON'



C. 'MULTI BLUE'

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