

Growing and Maintaining Clematis

By Jason Miller

June 6, 2008

A little planning and know-how will help you get the biggest and brightest blooms on the block.

That carpet of color you saw scrambling along a porch railing last year? The odds are good it was a clematis, a perennial vine known for its brilliant blossoms and relatively easy care. If you want to create a similar, show-stopping display, the path to success is surprisingly uncomplicated. Here's how.

After you've found a variety that you adore, determine what pruning group it belongs to. If the plant label doesn't tell you this, just plant it and watch it for a year, taking note of its growth habits. There are three groups: A, B, and C (sometimes called 1, 2, and 3, respectively), and all three groups should be pruned only in spring.

- Group A clematis generally do not die back in winter and bloom early in spring. They only need to be tidied up when pruning; cut back only the tips, never the main stems.
- With few exceptions, group B clematis are the large-flowered double bloomers and rebloomers. Cut back the tips, but also thin as necessary to balance the vine.
- Group C cultivars are the easiest to prune: Just cut all of the stems to within a foot of ground level, and train the new vines to your trellis in the pattern you desire. To determine if your clematis belongs to this group, leave it unpruned for a year. If it dies to the ground over winter or if the flowers are only at the top, with lots of last year's dead foliage and bare stems showing at the base, it probably belongs to group C.



Photo by Jason Miller.



Photo by Jason Miller.

Let's explore some of the other specifics of the three groups.

Group A clematis bloom in early spring on old wood (produced the previous year), so wait until after they're finished blooming before grabbing your pruners. Some of the more popular species in group A include *C. armandii*, *C. alpina*, *C. macropetala* and *C. montana*.

Group B clematis is a fun one. I grow ‘Belle of Woking’ myself, and love its luxurious double blooms. Other popular varieties include ‘Henryi’, ‘Nelly Moser’, and ‘Multi Blue’. Most clematis in this group grow 10 to 12 feet tall.



Even before it opens completely, a ‘Belle of Woking’ blossom is filled with restrained beauty. Photo by Jason Miller.



A ‘Nelly Moser’ clematis scrambles up the fencing surround compost bins at the Discovery Garden in Mount Vernon. Photo by Jason Miller.

Group C clematis offer a range of colors, from white to yellow to purple, stopping along the way with one of the most popular (and oldest) cultivars, ‘Jackmanii’, with its striking purple blooms with a hint of fuchsia hues. Flower sizes in this group are all over the map, from the 1-inch-diameter, pale blue blossoms of ‘Betty Corning’ to the 7-inch-diameter ‘Lady Betty Balfour’.

A word to the wise about height: Read the plant label carefully when considering your clematis choices to determine an individual plant’s mature height. Some evergreen varieties can zoom up to well over 20 feet—a poor choice for someone who wants to screen a short, 4-foot-tall section of fence! ‘Sweet Autumn’, on the other hand, can be allowed to ramble along the ground, serving as a bright-white ground cover.



Another resident of the Discovery Garden, this “curlyhead” variety, *C. ochroleuca*, frames the entrance to the Children’s Garden. Photo by Jason Miller.

Got a shady spot? Try ‘Comtesse de Bouchaud’ or ‘Hagley Hybrid’, two pink varieties that do well with less sun, although their flowers are smaller and less plentiful than their sun-loving counterparts.

Clematis will grow and bloom with very little intervention on your part. But if you want to make the jaws of passersby drop, try a little judicious pruning, a balanced meal of fertilizer, cool roots, and good sun. In time, you’ll develop a display worth of a photo shoot!

Quick tips for clematis success

Want a fountain of blooms and a strong plant that comes back year after year? Follow these steps.

- **Determine what type of vine you have:** A, B, or C (sometimes called 1, 2, and 3).
- **Get the soil right.** Have a soil test performed, then add lime or sulfur as necessary to adjust soil pH to 7 to 7.5. Dig your planting hole deep and wide, and set the plant in so the first two sets of leaf nodes are underground.
- **Mulch with 3 to 4 inches** of wood chips, bark, or other mulch. To ward off stem rot, keep the mulch about 6 inches from the stems.
- **Prune smartly.** Make straight cuts just above two strong buds (where two leaves were growing the previous year), which will then develop into new vines.
- **Beware clematis wilt.** You'll know it when you see it, because a part of a vine will wilt quickly. Just move quickly and cut that entire stem to the ground and throw it away (not in your compost pile). Consider applying a systemic fungicide such as benomyl or carbendazim to healthy vines after removing infected ones. Or, head off wilt at the starting gate by choosing wilt-resistant varieties such as 'Ville de Lyon', 'Nelly Moser', and 'Jackmanii'.
- **Balance your meals.** Don't overfertilize. An all-purpose, 10-10-10 granulated fertilizer applied once per year should be adequate. Follow the label instructions.
- **Skinny trellises are best.** Clematis climbing by twisting their leaf stems (petioles) around a support. Anything greater than $\frac{3}{4}$ inch in diameter is too large for a petiole to grab on to. I'm currently using a quarter-inch metal trellis and those skinny bamboo stakes to hold my clematis; other gardeners prefer knotted fishing line or even $\frac{3}{8}$ - or half-inch rebar. Netting slung over fences also works; in a few years, it's completely obscured by the rambling vines.



Most clematis vines climb by twisting their petioles (leaf stems) around a suitable support—anything smaller than $\frac{3}{4}$ inch in diameter will suffice. Photo by Jason Miller.