

Clematis, Queen of the Vines

By Kathy Wolfe
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These perennials fit any landscape design

You say CLEM-uh-tis and I say Cla-MAT-is. No matter how you pronounce it, these beautiful perennials are the Queen of the Vines in anyone's garden. Here are some reasons why *Clematis* can find a place in any landscape design.

Clematis can be evergreen or deciduous. Some are fragrant but others not. Flower colors range from deep purple to shades of blue, mauve, pink, red, yellow, cream, white and bi-colors. Choose double or single blossoms ranging from one to five inches across.

Many are flat shaped but there are also charming bell shapes. Vines can be between 2' - 30' tall. (Make a wise choice for your situation!). Bloom times range from spring through fall, with some flowering twice each year. About the only difficulty with *Clematis* is choosing which of the literally hundreds of species and cultivars in the genus will fit your garden needs.

Clematis can be grown in zones 4 through 7 and some even warmer. Most need at least six hours of full sun to thrive, although a few varieties (such as Jackmanii and Nelly Moser) tolerate more shade.

It was commonly thought that *Clematis* prefers its "tops in the sun, feet in the shade" by planting a low growing perennial or shrub in front of the *Clematis* to shade the base or placing a rock on the south side of the plant for the same effect. But now many professionals believe what they mostly need is ample moisture during the growing season. Surround your plant with a good mulch to help with hydration, but keep the mulch away from the stem. Afternoon filtered shade during the hottest part of the summer will help keep your dark-colored blooms from fading.

If you are not using a ground cover *Clematis* or allowing your vine to ramble, most *Clematis* will need some type of support. To avoid damaging the roots of your *Clematis*, the support should be in place before digging your hole. Research the mature size of your variety to understand how sturdy the structure needs to be.

A 6' - 10' plant with a 1' - 3' spread may only need a lightweight trellis, small tree or rose to train itself on, while an aggressive 15-footer with a spread of 6' will require something sturdier like a fence, wall or pergola. Note that *Clematis* has 2" - 3" leaf axles to twine around a support, so look for ones that are thin enough to allow the axles to get a good grip.

If training along a fence, up a pole or on a wall, staple small lengths of string into the shape you wish your *Clematis* to climb. If training up a tree, a bamboo support pole tilted at a 45-degree angle to the tree can get your clematis up to the tree canopy. Tie vines loosely to any stake using



Clematis Rebecca has 5 to 7 inch red flowers. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

plant ties. Be particularly careful when trying to interweave and manipulate the leafstalks around a support manually. Stems can be brittle and are apt to snap.

Prepare a well-drained, moist, rich, loamy soil with a neutral to slightly acidic pH about 12 inches from the base of the appropriate support you have chosen. Give your plant plenty of room in which to grow. Dig a hole two to three times wider and several inches deeper than the root ball. Plant the top of the root ball two to three inches below soil level to encourage new roots along the stems (note that a few varieties should be planted at the soil level of the pot so check the instructions which came with your plant or doublecheck with your nurseryman or on the web if you are unsure). Backfill the hole with soil enriched with organic matter and water well.

During the first season, keep the plant pruned back to a height of 18" – 24" to encourage branching and development of multiple stems from the buds underground. This initial training will pay back "in spades" as your plant matures to its best and most healthy shape and size. *Clematis* work hard creating their beautiful blooms and greenery, so keep them happy (but not overfed) by adding a balanced organic fertilizer (tomato or rose food works well or any in the range of 5-10-5 or 5-10-10) in early spring, summer and fall. Apply according to the manufacturer's recommendations.

And, yes, *Clematis* does need to be pruned to avoid looking like a shaggy mess. Pruning opens up the plant to air and light, stimulates new growth, encourages more flowering, improves plant

health, and controls the size of the vine. The confusion comes from determining whether your plant blooms on old wood (Group A), on new and old wood (Group B) or only on new wood (Group C).

Group A are the early bloomers, starting in spring. Because they flower on old wood, keep spring pruning to a minimum by only removing dead stems. After your plant has finished blooming, you can do more pruning and clean-up.



Clematis jackmanii produces a profusion of small purple flowers. *Photo by Nancy Crowell.*



Clematis seedheads can be almost as interesting as the flowers. *Photo by Nancy Crowell.*

Group B has its heaviest flowering on last year's wood, followed by a lighter bloom in the fall on this year's growth. Dead stems can be removed in early spring. After the first big flush of spring flowers fade, the stems of these flowers can be shortened. This group is the most challenging to work with for pruning so be sure to observe your flowering pattern throughout the season for best results. Group C flowers on the current year's wood in late summer or early fall. Cut back all stems to buds that are within 12 - 18" off the ground in spring when buds swell. This group is the easiest to prune.

For those of us who have a difficult time remembering our plant's cultivar, let alone its pruning group, don't panic. A well-established *Clematis* can be pruned hard or at the wrong time and will survive but may bloom at a different time than usual.

For more information on choosing varieties, check out the International *Clematis* Society's list of *Clematis* for Beginners (www.clematisinternational.com/cblcontent.html) and/or Great Plant Picks (www.greatplantpicks.org/plantlists/by_genus/clematis) to get you started. Bet you can't stop with one plant!

RESOURCES:

- "Clematis climb into a special place in the garden." Kym Pokomy. Oregon State University Extension Service. September 1, 2017. <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/news/clematis-climb-special-place-garden>
- "Pruning Clematis Demystified." Sandra Mason, State Master Gardener Coordinator. The Homeowners Column, University of Illinois Extension. www.web.extension.illinois.edu/cfiv/homeowners/031004.html

- “Clematis ‘Queen of the Vines.’” Steve Piskor, Master Gardener. Alleghany County, Penn State University Extension.
<https://extension.psu.edu/clematis-queen-of-the-vines>
- “The Versatile Clematis Vine.”Dr. Leonard Perry, Extension Professor. University of Vermont.
<http://pss.uvm.edu/ppp/articles/clematis.html>
- “Clematis.” Royal Horticultural Society.
www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?PID=97
- International Clematis Society website
www.clematisinternational.com

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.

Know & Grow Workshop

- What:** **WSU Master Gardener Know & Grow**
“Clematis---How to Grow and Maintain”
Marilyn Glen, A Whatcom Master Gardener and clematis expert will talk about growing and maintenance tips for clematis.
- When:** Tuesday, August 14
- Time:** 1:00 P.M - 2:30 P.M
- Where:** WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Research and Extension Center, 16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway)
- Cost:** Free
- Questions** Call the WSU Skagit County Extension at 360-428-4270, ext. 0.