

Clematis – They're Baaack

The darlings of the Victorian era, 'porch vine', traveler's joy, devil's thread, virgin's bower, bind-with-love, devil's-hair, gray-beard, smoking-cane, grandfather's whiskers, love-vine, snow-in-harvest, Father Time or clematis vines are making a comeback on the landscaping scene.

Does the back section of your fence look a little drab? Could the porch railing use some color? Need a sweet little groundcover? Why not tuck clematis into the landscape. At the nursery, on the internet, or in mail order catalogs, labels with enticing pictures tempt you. How can you possibly choose? You can get flowers in every shade of blue, red, and purple from the palest to the deepest. You can have cream or white flowers. There are flowers with bars of different colors in them. Shapes range from the hybrids huge dinner plate size flowers to the species tiny nodding bells, star shapes and little pagodas. The vines can be well behaved and wander through the landscape as a ground cover or the evergreen vines can soar into a tree for 30 feet. In between are the hybrids, those showgirls of the clematis world that go from 8 to 20 feet with ease.

When you look closer, somewhere in all the information is that dreaded phrase, pruning group...followed by Pruning Group A, Pruning Group B, or Pruning Group C. Oh no, you can't just stick it in the ground and let it go. You have to prune it. And what's with the Type A, Type B, Type C stuff?

The clematis in Type A need to be pruned only if space is limited. The blooms are borne on wood that is a year old, so if you are going to prune to tidy the vine up, then do it a month after the plant is finished blooming. Lots of new growth this summer means lots of flowers next spring. The clematis in this group are the earliest blooming species and hybrids. Type B are typically the large hybrids. These bloom in the spring and again in the fall. Spring blooms are borne on old wood (from the previous year). Prune the seed heads off after the bloom has gone and you will be rewarded with a second blooming of the plant. The flowers borne on this bloom will not be as large or as numerous as the first flush of flowers. Type C is cut back hard to 12 inches or less above ground level in February or March. They are vigorous growers and will flower from June to September on the new wood.

[Pennell's Garden Centres](#) (U.K.) devotes a large area of their *FAQ About Clematis* web-page to advice and help on clematis. The [International Clematis Society](#) has pruning advice and explanations. (To get to the advice on pruning Click on "Growing Clematis". On the resulting page click on the pruning shears.)

Planting



Clematis vine growing up fence

Once you've decided on which clematis you want for your yard, it's time to purchase the vine. Several sources are available on the web, each with enticing colored pictures and pertinent information on the vines they offer for sale.

[Chalk Hill Clematis](#) offers a large selection of species clematis.

[Gardenimport, Inc.](#) carries species and hybrid clematis.

Locally, [Joy Creek Nursery](#) has an informative web-site and they are close enough for a personal visit at 20300 NW Watson Rd., Scappoose, OR 97056; 503-543-7474. They carry both species and hybrid clematis.

Your clematis has arrived. Time to place it in the garden. Plant it in fertile, loamy, well-dug soil that is light and well drained. The roots prefer to be in the shade, while the vine itself does well in the sun or partial shade. If you have chosen clematis with intense color, or with contrasting bars, for the best show put it in light shade. If it is in the sun, the bloom will fade quickly. The crown should be buried 3 to 5 inches below the ground. Yes, you read that right. Plant the crown way deep in the ground in soil that will drain well. Remove any leaves that will be below the soil level. Add a thick layer of mulch on top and water. After you have watered, water it again and again until the plant is established. During the blooming season, feed your clematis once a month. If your clematis doesn't do well the first year, don't give up, next year it will do better. Chalk Hill Clematis advocates planting your clematis in the fall. When you buy those lush vines with blooms on them in the spring, the plant is stressed from trying to bloom and establish itself in a new garden home. Often it does not perform well until the second year. Waiting until fall, gives the clematis a breather. It has time to settle into its new home and establish some roots before it has to begin producing.

One last note. The hybrid clematis are subject to wilt, a fungal disease that can strike at any time. It can involve the whole plant or only a part of the plant. Remove all of the infected part and destroy it. Do not put it into your compost pile. The vine generally recovers; it is not a death sentence. If the whole vine is involved, leave the crown intact. There have been instances where it has taken from three to ten years, but the vine does recover. The smaller species clematis do not seem to suffer from wilt, and they are often scented. Alas, the hybrids are rarely scented.

The Victorians planted and hybridized clematis abundantly leaving us a wonderful legacy. Take advantage of all their hard work. Plant some clematis in your yard and enjoy their exuberance.

Bibliography

Books

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The following web-sites may prove useful.

[The International Clematis Society](#)

The American Clematis Society

The [International Clematis Society](#) visited Oregon in 2001 and visited quite a few nurseries in Oregon. This website details with words and pictures, that visit. (Click on "Site Map" followed by "2001 meeting in Oregon, USA".)