

Culture of Clematis

Acclaimed by the English as “Queen of the Climbers,” clematis is the kind of plant that demands our undivided attention, whether we are gardeners or spectators. Treated well, clematis provides spectacular blooms in vibrant shades of blue, red, and purple, in addition to a few brilliant whites. But so much splendor comes at the price of some exacting growing requirements.

The first key clematis requirement – soil that is both moisture-retentive as well as free draining – sounds like a contradiction, and it is unless we are generous with the planting hole. It should be 18 inches across and deep, then back-filled with organically rich soil amended with compost, well-rotted manure, or peat humus; sharp sand and a little lime finish the recipe.

Established plants should be fertilized with a balanced garden fertilizer. Organic compost or other fertilizer is recommended for long term feeding. Liquid fertilizer is also a good way to feed once a month.

The vine should be planted two or three inches deeper in its permanent home than it was in the container, to allow strong shoots to emerge from below ground level. Once planted, it is vital to keep the stem free from damage, especially from lawn mowers and trimmers.

Strong winds tossing the plant will also break stems; this is solved with a secure support or trellis of some kind. Clematis climbs by wrapping the petioles of their leaves around slender supports. Many folks find poultry wire or string fastened securely to the top of the support is key to tall well grown clematis. A guiding hand to encourage new growth to go where it should is also a good idea, if your support is not tall enough the clematis will simply hang over and grow down the other side.

Moisture is important to the success of your planting. Clematis is easily stressed by drought or heat on the roots. The first season watering is essential to keep even moisture at the root ball. Mulch is recommended and a bushy shrub, annual, or perennial is a way to keep the roots cool and moist by providing shade at the roots zone.

Although many varieties will accept partial shade, most must be in full sun. Six hours of sun is near the minimum but if the plant can climb to reach this much sun it will be happy.

If the preparations should seem to demanding and the warnings too dire, remember that a happy clematis easily outlives the human who planted it. It is a true perennial, if not one of the immortals. A mature plant may put out hundreds of stunning blooms and become the star of the garden.

Do not loose heart if your clematis does not get going for two years or more. If the ground preparation was done right, it should thrive eventually.

Pruning

Clematis can be divided into three groups according to the pruning required. The back of the tag that came with your clematis will indicate which group your clematis is in.

Group 1 of clematis needs no pruning. These are labeled as “Prune: None”. This group produces its flowers directly from a leaf axil bud on stems produced the previous season, which were

hardened by the early autumn. After all flowering has been completed, remove all dead and weak stems. Then tie all remaining stems into position. A well – established plant should not require any pruning.

Group 2 is labeled “Prune: Moderate”. Many of our large flowered cultivars and early clematis are in this group. The flowers are produced from the old or previous year’s growth. Stems from three to thirty inches in length bear these flowers. In spring just as new growth starts prune out all weak and damaged stems then shorten the rest to a strong pair of leaf buds; usually this is five to eight inches. This is the time to reduce unwanted growth that is too long or unmannerly.

Some folks find the lower stems bare and unattractive. The solution to this is to prune about one third of the long stems to six to eight inches above ground each year thus stimulating new growth lower down.

Group 3 is labeled “Prune: Hard”: These clematis produce their blooms on new growth each year and the previous seasons growth usually dies back naturally during the winter. Therefore all the old growth is removed to just above ground level giving room for this years stems to grow and the plant a fresh start.

Clematis send new shoots from below ground level and are forgiving of pruning that is too hard but you suffer by missing this years flowers.

Clematis is seldom bothered by pests or disease. Being quick to re-grow, they spring back from damaging attacks if not in this season in the next.

Clematis wilt is the most common disease and the most damaging as well. The leaves turn yellow and the whole plant wilts in a short time. The best cure is to cut the plant to just above the ground and carefully discard all the diseased material in the trash (not in the compost). A fungicide or sterilizing agent, such as peroxide, applied to the surrounding area at least twice in a two week period may also help control disease.

Other diseases you may see but usually are more cosmetic than damaging are powdery mildew and botrytis. Keeping the plant healthy with conditions it likes and regular fertilizer are the best defense against any disease problems.

Other pests such as slugs or aphids seldom cause long term damage. A spray of soapy water will wash away aphids.

If there is room just for one plant in an urban space, make it a clematis, in the garden, it is safe to be a monarchist.