



CLEMATIS

How to plant and care for American's favorite vine

Clematis is America's most popular flowering vine and for good reason. It's one of the most colorful of all climbers, it's largely pest-free, and with a few "inside tips," it's easy to grow.

Once the clematis gets used to its new home in your garden, it should thrive for many years.

You've got lots of choices in colors with this plant. Clematis (pronounced KLEM-a-tis) comes in white, pink, blue, purple, red mauve, lavender and in some cases, blends of more than one color. There are hundreds of varieties.

Many clematis bloom for several weeks in late April through June with some sporadic follow-up blooming into fall. Many others bloom in early summer, and a few bloom in late summer to fall.

Most clematis have wide, flat blossoms with four or more sepals. (the sepals are what appear to be flower petals, but they're technically not petals.) Most also drop their leaves in winter, except for a few evergreen types, such as the seldom used armandii species.

Support your Local Clematis

Some clematis climb only a few feet, but some of the more vigorous ones can stretch out 50 feet. That's why you'll want to plant all but the shrubbiest varieties next to a trellis, arbor or other support. The twining tips will wind their own way up strings and fencing, but you'll have to train them or tie them up poles and other large or smooth surfaces.

Clematis flowers are most often flat, but some varieties have urn-shaped flowers while a few are trumpet-shapes. Get some extra ornamental mileage out of your plants by cutting a few clematis blooms for indoor

flower arrangements. Or float cut clematis flowers in a bowl of water after burning the ends with a match to lengthen their life.

Clematis are at their best when used as a light, airy, colorful screen planting, such as on a deck-side trellis, on a porch railing or growing up and over a pergola or archway. They're also great for growing on fences or up light poles to add vertical color to the front yard. Clematis can even be grown intertwined with climbing roses, grown up trees, grown sprawling out of hanging baskets or grown to ramble as a groundcover.

Planting Clematis

The ideal spot for a clematis is in moist, well-drained soil that gets sun for a least half the day— six hours or more, although some dappled shade in the hottest part of the day is fine.

You'll find some differing opinions on exactly how to plant them, but in our clayey, soil, we suggest "babying them" a little. Dig a deep and wide hole (about 2 feet deep and 3 feet wide) and improve the soil with one-third part peat moss, rotted manure, mushroom soil, compost or other organic matter to two-third parts of your soil.

Plant your clematis slightly BELOW grade (about 2 inches deep), backfill and water well with a fertilizer high in phosphorus (the middle number on the formula). Note that this is different than the advice for just about all other shrubs and vines. The main reason for the below-grade planting is that it encourages the formation of more shoots in the event stems are gnawed off by rabbits or rodents or killed by wilt. (more on that later).



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After Planting Care

Clematis takes a while to get settled, so don't be alarmed if the growth isn't tremendous that first year. Just make sure you keep the plant well-watered— at least one deep soaking per week to the bottom of the root ball.

Clematis are fairly heavy feeders, so feed them monthly up until flowering time with a balanced fertilizer. Or you can feed them in the spring with an organic or slow-release fertilizer, such as Osmocote. Clematis like near-neutral soil (a pH of about 7), so add lime if your soil is on the acidic side.

While clematis plants like sun, the roots prefer to be cool and moist. Maintain that 2 inch layer of mulch at all times or plant a shallow-rooted groundcover around them (such as sweet woodruff, creeping phlox, candytuft or veronica). Heading into winter, it also helps to add a little extra root protection with a thick layer of straw or shredded leaves.

Pruning

To encourage fuller plants, prune all varieties back to about 12 inches (or to two to three buds) the first year. From then on, pruning varies depending on the variety. For pruning purposes, clematis falls into three groups.

The first group blooms in early spring on buds formed the previous year. This type generally need very little pruning unless it outgrows its space. Prune this group back immediately after blooming but no later than July. Remove shoots that have bloomed, thin out dead or weak branches and head back branches if you need to control the size. Do not cut back into the main branches, though.

Common clematis in this group include: *C. alpine*, *C. macropetala* and *C. Montana*.

The second group consists of the large-flowered hybrids that mostly bloom in mid-

June and sometimes again in late summer. Prune these in late winter (late February or march) by removing dead or weak branches and cutting back the remaining branches to the topmost pair of large, plump green buds.

Common clematis in this group include Nelly Moser, Bee's Jubilee, Henryi, The President, Niobe and a great many more.

The third group consists of the late-flowering types, which bloom on the last 2 to 3 feet of that season's new growth. Prune these back hard in late winter by cutting back all branches to 2-3 feet.

Common clematis in this group include Etoile Violette, Lady Betty Balfour, Comtesse de Bouchard, *C. Texensis*, *C. tangutica*, *C. orientalis*, *C. integrifolia*, *C. paniculata* (Sweet Autumn, Jackmanii, and Star of India).

Watch for Wilt

One of the few threats to clematis is a disease commonly called "clematis wilt." this fungal disease causes vines to turn brown and die. New shoots usually will sprout, but it detracts from what should be season-long foliage.

The large-flowered hybrids are most susceptible to wilt, so choosing early and late varieties can help prevent it. Having light, high-organic soil and using kelp meal as fertilizer also seem to help prevent it.

If wilt hits, remove all infected plant parts and the infected mulch. Drench the soil with a fungicide until new growth starts.

Clematis also sometimes is infected by powdery mildew, another fungal disease that causes a white, powdery spotting on leaves. It also can be treated by a fungicidal spray.

Bugs seldom bother clematis. It's one of the few plants that even Japanese beetles hardly every touch.