

Home Grounds Fact Sheet

How to Keep a Clamp on Clematis Problems

Clematis can be very finicky plants and they suffer a lot of problems. There is also a lot of confusion on the best practices for good growth and healthy plants. With a little patience and a few pointers you can have clematis that are the envy of everyone on the block.

Planting

The best overall time to plant clematis is early spring using bare root stock, although container grown plants can be stuck in at any point. Choose the east or north side of your property, somewhere where filtered sun will be available for the upper part of the plant yet roots will be kept cool. Unlike other plants the crown **should** be covered with two inches of soil so that new buds can emerge from a protected section if something happens to the top. Clematis are **very** slow to establish, and you will see little or no top growth or flowers during the first year after planting. This is good because the plant is concentrating its energy in making roots. Therefore you should not try to force growth or flowering during this period. Look for your plants to really become show pieces about three years after planting. Clematis also tend to like soils that are not acid so test the pH of your soil before planting and incorporate lime if necessary when you incorporate your fertilizer (one half cup of 5-10-10 is suggested by one source). Fertilize again once the vine starts to grow and then again the spring following planting.

Soak your plants for an hour or so in a bucket of water before you plant, and if stems are longer than a foot, cut them back to encourage side branching and to make plants less prone to snapping off at the base. Clematis with purple or red blossoms will bleach in the sun so use these varieties in shadier spots. Set a growth support for plants to twine around in place **before** you plant your clematis to avoid disturbing roots and crown later unless you are planning to use the clematis as a ground cover.

Along with incorporating organic amendments into the planting hole, mulch around your installed plant but not right up to the stem since this encourages fungal diseases to which clematis are very prone.



Pests and Diseases

Rabbits can be a huge problem and if you know there are killer bunnies in your neighborhood, it is recommended that you install an 18" high clay chimney pipe over the plant. That way the rabbits can't get at the crown.

Earwigs can also be a nasty problem in clematis, chewing holes in flowers and leaves, or in buds, ruining flowers before they open. This can be especially bad if plants are located next to brick buildings or other construction with cracks and crevices ideal as earwig hideaways. You can try stuffing a discarded plant container with newspaper and placing it on a stick near where damage occurs. Earwigs will hide inside this and can be removed daily and destroyed. Another trick consists of rolling up newspaper and securing either end loosely with rubber bands. These can be collected and discarded daily as well.

Mice can also nip clematis at the base especially where they grow up through other ground covers. This damage usually is most noticeable in spring, and new growth will initiate from the base so ignore it.

Spider mites will bother clematis especially if it is dry, causing distortion of leaves and flowers and flecking. Hosing off the plant on a regular basis can keep spider mites down. Clematis should never be allowed to dry out in the root zone or the plant quality will severely suffer. Slugs and snails can also be annoying especially in spring following a mild winter.

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Clematis wilt is the most serious problem you will face if you are growing large flowered varieties. The fungus attacks the plant at the soil line or just above, entering through a crack or a point of previous damage. The plumbing of the stem is blocked up and the stem collapses turning black, then brown and the whole plant collapses overnight, usually in early summer just before the clematis flowers.

Affected stems need to be removed immediately and destroyed (no composting!), then drench the base with a recommended fungicide in a two foot diameter around the plant.

Clematis with a good set of growth buds below the soil will usually recover if the drenching program is continued. Get the stems as woody as possible as quickly as possible, and when stems reach 9-12 inches, remove tip growth to encourage side branching. Keep stems from damage as much as possible, treating the entire plant as though it was newly planted in terms of feeding, watering, pruning and training on the support. For more care free gardening you might choose *C. vitacella* cultivars like Blue Belle which are not susceptible to wilt.

Another bane of the large flowered varieties is good old powdery mildew. Use the baking soda based pesticides available at recommended rates for control and increase air circulation around your plants.

Training Vines

So how about training them to climb? The secret is soft restraints. You can use soft twine or pieces of panty hose to get your clematis started, even if you are growing it through a hedge or shrub. Deadheading is ok, but allow some spent flowers to remain for the interest of the fluffy seed heads.

Pruning

By far the largest source of confusion is pruning, and like other trees and shrubs, it depends on when the plant flowers.

- Varieties that bloom from mid-June-fall are pruned back to 12-18" in beginning the second spring after planting just as buds begin to swell. Because flowers form only on the current season's wood, pruning at this time results in more flowers and a bushier plant. Varieties include *C. jackmanii*, Madame Julia Correvon, Comtesse de Bouchard, Etoile Violette, Ville de Lyon and *C. paniculata*. If your clematis is growing through a hedge or evergreen, you can start the reduction process in autumn so your support plant doesn't look ratty through the winter with dormant clematis plastered all over it. Cut stems back to about a foot and a half in late autumn, then all the way in the spring. This reduces winter damage and an invitation to clematis wilt as well.
- Varieties that bloom between early May and mid June, then again in fall should be **lightly** pruned in early spring to remove **only** dead, weak or rogue stems. These varieties flower on **old** wood. These are the most common types and include Nelly Moser, H.F. Young, Candida, Henryi, Duchess of Edinburgh, Lincoln Star, Dr. Ruppel and Miss Bateman
- Not sure what the variety is? Let it go for a season or two and make note of its bloom time, then act accordingly.

Important Information

How is the word clematis pronounced? We hear it both ways – *klem-a-tis* and *kle-mah-tis*. Choose the one with which you're comfortable and just enjoy the beauty of these lovely plants.