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A Basic Guide on How to be Successful with Clematis – The Queen of Vines

The large flowered Clematis are generally very tame, non-strangling vines requiring little care and attention. Once these long-lived, perennial vines become established, at 3 years of age or so, they require little maintenance, generally only light pruning in early spring, and will reward you year after year with an amazing show of color. Proper pruning will help with repeat flowering of many spring flowering varieties, many of which can be pruned immediately after flowering to induce a second phase of flowering in late summer. They can be used on mailboxes, fences, trellises, lattice-work, in containers, and some are vigorous enough to cover large walls and arbors given something to cling to.

Clematis can be mixed with other non-strangling vines, such as climbing roses, to get more out of your vertical spaces. These vines are often commonly planted to grow up through large shrubs and trees to provide additional color without increasing your garden space. The preferred planting time is spring, fall, and late winter, if planting in summer, hopefully from containers, be sure to provide ample water in periods of low rainfall until the plant is well established.

When planting clematis choose a site where they can have their head in the sun and their feet in the shade. Clematis seem to be happiest in an area where their root systems are kept cool and moderately moist. You can achieve this by planting a dense, non-strangling groundcover beneath them, mulching them deeply with an organic mulch such as pine straw (*Note: keep the mulch deep over the root zone, but do not pile it next to the base of the plant, leave an air gap between the mulch and the stem of 1-2"*), or some suggest that you place a stepping stone or piece of flagstone over the root zone. Also, when planting on an arbor, trellis or other structure plant the clematis about 1' from the structure, to give the roots room to grow, and plant it on the shaded side to keep the roots cool. Most clematis prefer full to partial sun and almost all varieties will do well in afternoon shade, check the specifics for the variety you have chosen to get peak performance.

Clematis prefer a mildly acidic to alkaline soil, with good drainage, rich in organic matter, and moderately fertile. Dig a large generous hole, 18-24" wide but deep enough that the top of the root crown will be just below the soil's surface. Some resources recommend placing the root crown 3-4" deep, and others recommend putting one set of buds just below the soil line. It is always a good idea to check with your local county extension agent or master gardeners to determine what is best in your region. Add enough organic matter, such as potting soil, compost, or manure to create a 1:1 ratio. Mix the topsoil and organic matter in the hole to get an even composition. Create a hole in the middle of this large enough to easily accept the root ball of the Clematis. The bottom of the hole should be firm and flat to match the bottom of the root-ball when transplanting from containers. If planting bare-root plant you generally want to plant it with its roots carefully spread and often on a slight mound beneath the crown. Otherwise, carefully remove the pot, you generally do not want to disturb the root ball during this process when the plants are in growth.

Mulch generously with a breathable organic mulch, plant a dense but non-aggressive, low groundcover, or use a stone to shade the root-zone and help retain moisture. This will also help to keep weeds down and will reduce the amount of watering required. If planting in late spring or summer, supplement rains to provide the equivalent of 1" of rainfall per week, water sparingly, or not at all when the plants are dormant in winter.

There are 3 main pruning classes of Clematis, and each should be pruned accordingly to get the most out of your plants. **Group 1** - The early flowering species clematis, such as *C. montana 'Rubens'*, flower on last year's growth and should be pruned immediately after flowering. Remove dead or damaged stems and prune to keep in bounds, this will also promote new growth for next year's flowers. **Group 2** - The early to mid-season large flowered varieties produce flowers from side shoots which emerge from last season's growth. Remove any dead or damaged stems in early spring before growth begins and prune all remaining stems back to where strong healthy leaf buds are visible. Deadheading the Group 2 Clematis' will encourage late summer flowering for most varieties. **Group 3** - The late large-flowered cultivars flower on new wood from this year's growth as do many of our native species. Cut the previous year's stems back to a pair of strong leaf buds at 6-8" above soil level before growth begins in early spring. Be careful when handling or training clematis vines as they are fairly brittle. Use a soft stretchable material when attaching them to supports such as scraps of old panty hose or a stretchable garden tape, and tie them loosely and carefully so as not to break or kink the stems. In order to climb, Clematis wrap their leaf petioles around small diameter nearby supports. For Clematis that are to be cut back hard annually a disposable string trellis can be an efficient way to clean them up before spring. Simply cut the vines back to the appropriate height and cut the strings and you're done, just be sure to replace the strings before spring growth begins. If you intend to compost the remains you will want to use a strong and moderately long-lasting, biodegradable material.

Clematis are moderately heavy feeders when in growth. Begin fertilizing in early spring, once the new shoots are 1-2" long. We prefer to use a non-burning, balanced, slow-release fertilize as needed during the growing season. broadcast the fertilize over the root-zone, being careful not to pile it next to the base of the plant, and water it in well. Once established the Clematis should bring you many of years of enjoyment with minimal maintenance in return.

Thank You & Good Growing,

Almost Eden

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