

Basic Clematis Growing Techniques

Clematis has been long hailed as the Queen of the vines, and for good reason. There is no other perennial vine that offers as much versatility in both form and colour and there has never been such abundant access to this wonderful plant then there is today.

The ideal time for planting is spring and early fall. Plant when the soil is neither frozen nor very wet, remembering that all clematis require well-drained soil.

Soil

Fertile, loamy soil in the garden is ideal for cultivation of clematis, most of which thrive on a regular supply of balanced nutrients and moisture. In the absence of such soil, or if the soil is not in very good condition, prepare the site before planting a clematis. If the soil is heavy clay, add coarse horticultural grit or sharp sand to improve it. If the soil is sandy, add as much humus (organic matter) as possible. Well-rotted farmyard or horse manure, garden compost, leaf-mould, mushroom compost, or good-quality, proprietary, soil-based potting compost are excellent materials for improving and enriching the soil.

Although clematis are known to thrive in alkaline soils (pH value more than 7), they also grow satisfactorily on neutral to acid soil (pH value of 7 or below). For better results with extremely acidic soils, add ordinary lime (calcium carbonate), which is both easy to handle and relatively safe to use. Ideally, lime should be dug into the soil far in advance of planting. If using farmyard manure to enrich the soil, refrain from adding lime at the same time, as it reacts with the nitrogen-rich manure to release nitrogen in the form of ammonia, which may damage the plants. Annual liming is not recommended as over-liming may result in deficiencies of other soil nutrients. It is worthwhile, however, to test the soil occasionally, especially light, sandy soils, as rain tends to leach lime from it. Lime-rich mushroom compost also helps to increase soil alkalinity.

Planting hole

When planting a clematis in the garden, dig a hole at least twice as wide as the pot in which the plant is growing and at least twice as deep again. 18 by 18 in. or larger is ideal for accommodating organic matter below and around the root ball, giving the clematis a good start for healthy growth. Loosen the base and sides of the hole with a garden fork. If the soil is heavy clay, place some coarse grit or sharp sand mixed with the soil at the bottom of the hole before placing any organic material in it. This improves drainage and prevents water logging. Place some well-rotted compost or shredded peat at the base of the planting hole to a depth of at least 4 in.

Soak the container in which the plant is growing so that the entire root ball is wet. Make sure the planting hole is moist. This is a very important step before planting because, once planted, the roots will need time to grow into the surrounding soil, absorb water and nutrients, and distribute adequate amounts of water to the rest of the plant. Ease the plant with its cane support out of the container and gently loosen the roots at the bottom of the root ball to encourage quick growth into the surrounding soil.

Place the root ball in the prepared planting hole.

Ensure that the surface of the root ball is at least 2in. below the rim of the hole. Deep planting encourages large-flowered cultivars to develop a healthy basal root crown of buds below the soil level as a precaution against sudden wilting. When the plant is in position, fill the area around the root ball with equal parts of good soil and potting compost mixed with the recommended amount of any general-purpose fertilizer. Gently firm the mixture around the root ball. Cover the base of the plant with additional organic matter used at the base of the planting hole, taking care to keep it away from the stems or vines. When mounded, it serves as a mulch to prevent excessive loss of moisture. Water the plant well, allowing at least 1 gallon of water per plant. Finally, attach a label to the plant with the name of the clematis and the date of planting.

To provide a certain amount of shade for the plant's root system and to prevent excessive loss of moisture, plant a low-growing perennial or shrub close to the newly planted clematis. Avoid using slates, slabs, or tiles to shade the clematis roots as these also provide hiding places for slugs, snails, woodlice, and other insect pests.

The main reasons for pruning clematis are to establish a tidy presentation on some sort of support, encourage healthy vigorous growth and maximize the flowering potential. Pruning methods and timing are essentially the same whether they are in the garden or in a container. You should always use a sharp, clean tool when pruning any clematis. Pinching or breaking the vine will only serve to damage the tissue and possibly cause disease problems. A clean cut is always preferable. New clematis should be pruned back to about 12 inches in the spring following their planting. This pruning will encourage new shoots to grow and will produce a fuller, bushier vine with more leads. New growth on an established plant will begin very close to where the previous year's growth stopped. Over time this will cause the vine to become bare at the bottom. Old established vines that have bare bases can be rejuvenated by an early, hard pruning. Cut the plant back to 12 to 18 inches in the early spring, just as the plant begins to grow. This may reduce or delay the blooming that year depending on the variety, but will restore the lower growth and make for a fuller vine in the long run.

Most Clematis are vigorous, climbing vines. Given the right conditions, they are capable of impressive growth rates. Among the many basic requirements for rapid growth are nutrients. Nutrients, along with water and light allow the vines to produce energy

and grow. Sunshine and water may be in good supply but if we don't fertilize our clematis they won't be as good as they can be. Clematis that are grown in containers have some special requirements because of their finite volume of soil. If left unfertilized the pot will become totally devoid of nutrients. This is called leaching. The vine will turn yellow, become weak and eventually die. However we must be careful not to add too many nutrients too often. This can cause a buildup and a nutrient overload that will result in fertilizer burn and can also lead to death. So what do you do?

There are a number of solutions but the one that seems to work the best is liquid fertilizer. Liquid fertilizer is purchased as a powder. This powder contains all the essential nutrients required for optimal growth. The powder is then mixed with the appropriate amount of warm water to form a nutrient solution that is typically translucent blue. This solution is then used to water the plant. Liquid feed works very well with the light soils typically used for container growing. It provides the roots with immediately available nutrients that can last three or four waterings before they are completely leached. Any container plant needs frequent watering when the plant is actively growing. Anyone who has taken care of a hanging basket full of fern or fuchsia can attest to this. Some times daily waterings are required. Clematis in containers typically require less watering than these extreme examples but none the less require their fair share. You will be watering your containerized clematis a couple of times a week in the summer months.

You should liquid fertilize your container clematis once a month at the recommended rate of the fertilizer you purchased. Typically this is a few table spoons per gallon. Begin to liquid feed in April or May, as the new shoot appear and continue until September or October. This could be 6 or 7 times. It is a good idea to thoroughly soak the container the day before you liquid fertilize. This will wash away any possible build ups and leave the container ready for its new dose of food.

Clematis growing in containers need some extra attention and routine care of watering, feeding, training, and tying-in their new growths from spring through early autumn. The amount of nutrients available in potting compost usually lasts for only four to six weeks. Compost also tends to dry out rapidly in containers, especially during hot summer months. Therefore, it is important to feed and water container-grown plants diligently.

Do not depend on a passing shower of rain. Even during heavy rainfall, only a fraction of water falls on the surface of a container and additional water should be considered. Slow-release fertilizer is a boon to container-culture. If such fertilizer has already been incorporated into the compost at the time of planting, take care not to overfeed with other general-purpose granular or liquid fertilizers.

Winter care of container plants

Clematis in containers in open gardens, with the possible exception of very mild or sheltered maritime gardens, do not enjoy the wetness, very low temperatures or strong, cold winds of winter. This means that every care should be taken to shelter these plants from the elements until the arrival of warm weather. If the containers are not too heavy, move them into a glasshouse, well-lit garage, outhouse, shed, or porch. If such shelter is unavailable, position the containers at the base of a south-facing wall for protection.

Should the containers prove too heavy to move and, if the plants are hardy, prune away the top one-third of the stems and tie-in the rest to their supports to prevent wind damage and to protect the roots. A thick mulch gives added protection to the roots.

Plants which are not very hardy but in containers too heavy to move should be wrapped in place to prevent excessive winter damage and loss. Wrap the plants with layers of old sheet or burlap or horticultural fleece, and the containers with bubble wrap. Keep the compost slightly moist. During late winter or early spring, remove the coverings and inspect the plant. Water if the soil is dry and prune the plants as necessary. Re-cover the clematis until all danger of frost has passed.

Spring care of container plants

Plants that overwinter in containers should be repotted in spring or, at the least, have their soil replenished. Simply remove the top 3-4 in. of soil, and replace it with a mixture of two parts loam-based potting soil and one part peat or suitable peat alternative. Ensure that the plant is supported securely, water it thoroughly, and commence feeding.

Repotting container plants

Not all container-grown clematis perform satisfactorily over many seasons, particularly the large-flowered cultivars with extensive roots. If, however, the same plant is to continue growing in a container after two or three seasons, it must be transferred to a larger container.

Successful repotting requires patience and time, especially if the containers are large and the plants are very mature. The best time for repotting clematis is early to late spring. If the plant needs pruning, do so before repotting it. Then, unless the container is too large or too heavy, ease the root ball carefully out of the container and move it to a larger pot filled with fresh potting compost. Firm the plant in, and water it. If the container is very large, lay it on its side and run a long-bladed knife between the compost and the container to loosen the root ball and ease it out. If the mouth of the container is not wide enough for the root ball to pass through, use a carving knife or similar implement to cut the outer 5-7.5 cm (2-3 in.) of the root ball before removing it. Once the root ball is out of the container, it may be necessary to reduce its size by cutting off 5-7.5 cm (2-3 in.) of roots, or even more from the outer edges. This is known as root pruning. Continue with repotting following the method outlined above for planting clematis in containers.

When repotting, refrain from forcing the plant out of its container by the stems. If canes support the plant, remove them before repotting to prevent any accidental injuries to yourself. Prune away at least one-third of the stems of clematis which flower on old wood, even if it means loss of flowers during the following season. Clematis with good, strong roots seldom die. If the clematis is too big for a container, plant it in the open garden and start over with a young plant.