

## The Mysterious Demise of a Clematis Vine

By Susan Camp

At a recent Tree Steward meeting, a member was discussing exceptional trees—ones that are notable because of size, age, rarity, or unique history. Exceptional trees often go unnoticed for decades before they are recognized. The trees just grow and develop on their own, without human intervention. In some cases, once a tree is deemed exceptional, the property owner will start pruning, feeding, and fertilizing, following the best professional instructions. And the tree dies.

I haven't killed a tree by pampering it, but I may have caused the demise of a lovely, faithfully flowering Clematis jackmanii by offering it some attention for the first time in at least ten years. The vine had grown in the same spot, climbing a narrow-slatted lattice attached to the potting shed and bloomed every summer with saucer-sized, violet blossoms. This spring I decided to freshen up the bed with compost and mulch, and prune the vine heavily. When we returned from our trip last month, I found that the plant had disappeared completely. Obviously, I had done something wrong.

The genus Clematis is composed of mostly woody or semi-woody, deciduous vines, although *C. armandii* is evergreen. A small number of herbaceous perennial shrubs exist, as well. Clematis belongs to the buttercup family with over 295 species and many named hybrids and cultivars. Clematis grows in USDA Hardiness Zones 4 through 8.

Clematis vines range in length from 2 to 5 feet to 20 to 30 feet, depending on the species, so there is a Clematis vine for every location, from a container on the patio to a latticed wall or a tall trellis. All Clematis vines need support, although some species can serve as groundcover or be allowed to spread free-range through landscape plants. Support structures must consist of thin material like wire or fishing line, because Clematis vines attach to the support by wrapping their short leaf stems around it.

Flower sizes range from the tiny, white bells of *C. armandii* to huge single or double flowers of six or seven petals in a variety of shades from pale lavender to deep purple, pink to deep burgundy, and even yellow.

Clematis vines require full sun to part shade, especially on hot, humid summer afternoons. The vines need fertile, moist, well-drained, neutral to mildly alkaline soil. Roots must be kept damp and shaded. Groundcover, small perennials, or flat stones can provide shading, but compost and mulch should be spread 1 to 2 inches away from the bases of vines. Vigorous cultivation can damage or kill the vines.

Clematis vines may take several years to establish strong root systems. Don't get discouraged by slow growth. The Clemson University Extension publication HGIC 1104 "Clematis" quotes an

old saying, “The first year they sleep, the second year they creep and the third year they leap.” Once established, Clematis should bloom for many years.

The trickiest part of caring for Clematis is knowing when and how to prune. You have to know the species and cultivar, because Clematis is divided into three groups, depending on whether the vines bloom on old or new wood or both.

Group 1 vines bloom on old wood and should be pruned only to control spread. *C. montana* ‘Mayleen’ is included in Group 1.

Group 2 plants bloom on old wood and a second time on new wood, so remove weak growth and shape in early spring, then prune again after the first blooms have faded. Many popular cultivars belong to Group 2.

Group 3 vines bloom only on new wood and can be pruned back to 12 inches in the early spring, which is what I did to our Jackman Clematis hybrid, a Group 3 member.

The mystery remains. Did I kill the Clematis with pampering, or had it just lived out its lifespan? I will never know, but the Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder contains entries for many species of Clematis. I can find a replacement.

June 27, 2017