

Caring For Your Clematis



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Plant Characteristics

Clematis (KLEM-a-tis) is from the Greek and means "vine," and is a member of the *Ranunculaceae* (buttercup) family. Clematis are hardy plants and can survive for 25 years or more.

Site Requirements

Clematis have a reputation for being difficult to grow, however, like any other plant, if their needs can be met by the site and proper care, they will thrive. Clematis require full sun to grow best (6+ hours direct sun per day) though some dappled shade during the heat of the day is beneficial. Flowers of some red, blue and bicolored large-flowered hybrids fade badly in too much sun and should be planted in eastern exposures or partial shade. Soil should be rich and well-draining with a pH close to neutral (7.0). Though the plant's stems and foliage should be in sun, the roots like a cool, moist environment produced by low perennials or shrubs. Most clematis will require staking so the twining leaf petioles can cling and climb upward, though some gardeners choose to let the plants sprawl over the ground, over woodpiles, other plants, etc.



Planting and Establishing

After amending the native soil, dig a hole to accommodate the root system. Cut stems back to 12 inches in height to help the plant branch as it begins to grow and reduce the chance of stem breakage during planting. Plant the crown one to two inches below the soil surface to enable it to recover should it be mowed off, damaged by animals or infected with clematis wilt. Fill in the hole with the backfill soil, firm and water well to settle soil around the root system. After planting, a protective collar of hardware cloth or chicken wire around the base of the plant protects against damage from mowers, string trimmers and animals. Clematis may seem slow to establish, with little growth and few or no blooms in the first season as the roots become well established. Fertilize during establishment, but fertilization may not be needed or desired once the plant is established and growing well. Plants need about one inch of water per week during the growing season applied through irrigation or rainfall.

Problems

The most devastating problem of large-flowered hybrid clematis is a fungal stem rot and leaf spot caused by the fungus *Ascochyta clematidina* and commonly called "wilt." Small-flowered hybrids and the species and their cultivars are less susceptible to wilt. Symptoms include a sudden stem collapse typically as the flower buds are about to open, and within a few days, the stem and leaves turn black. The usual treatment is to remove the diseased stem below the wilted section, even below soil line. Plants usually recover from buds lower on the stem. Powdery mildew is another fungal disease that can occur on flowers and young stems, usually in July and August. It should be treated with a fungicide when first noticed. Aphids may feed early in the season on new growth. Slugs and earwigs may feed on stems, blooms, buds or foliage. Rabbits and mice may feed on stems. Birds may feed on overwintering buds.