

ON PRUNING CLEMATIS (revised 2019)

When you bring a new clematis home, your first thought is probably where to plant it. But right along with that should go a rite of passage: the first pruning. Most young clematis growing in a 1-gallon pot will have one or two (perhaps three) stems coming from the buried crown, and may be about three feet tall. At that point, unless flower buds have formed, the top growth is the least important part of the plant, and *should be cut back by ½ the plant height without delay*, leaving one or two sets of leaves. This reduces initial demand on the root system as it is transplanted and adjusting to a new habitat, initiates new growth quickly, and reduces shock. The result: a stronger plant with bushier growth and more bloom to come. One is unwilling to prune a new plant that is about to bloom—enjoy the flowers by all means—but as soon as the flowers are gone, prune the clematis and plant it.

After the first year, pruning is quite simple if you just keep in mind one principal: the best time to prune any clematis is when it has finished its main first flush of bloom. Many clematis will rebloom.

Three pruning goals: the **health** of the plant, **training** the plant, and **making flowers**.

Health: In the wild, clematis species reach their mature height rapidly and are only pruned by calamity, climate, and their DNA. In a garden, we ask them to behave differently and flower more. Here are examples of health issues to consider.

- Evergreen clematis form a heavy thatch that promotes mildew. Therefore it is vital they be cut to remove thatch and stimulate new growth every three years. The same is true of the winter-blooming clematis. *Any* clematis that becomes too large or heavy may be pruned after flowering.
- For herbaceous perennial clematis (non-vining), clean up the plant, as soon as it is dormant, since that old growth will not rejuvenate. Those dead stems and leaves can harbor pests and spread decay onto new shoots and leaves as they emerge in spring

Training: Sometimes a clematis may not go where you want it to! Wayward growth may be removed at any time. If you want the plant to grow on a fence or trellis, but not above it, cut off new vertical shoots once they reach the top. The new horizontal shoots can be woven into the structure. However, if you try to bend tall straight stems, or make stems growing on the ground stand up, you may break them at the node (the point where they connect to the main or lower stem). You'll notice the piece you bent and tied go limp within days. It is better to simply cut it off. This saves untying and removing the dead stem.

Pruning for Flowers: There is truly no such thing as a late or early large-flowered hybrid. If you hard prune them in late winter (hard pruning means to 12" tall or less), they may flower later, and if you leave ½ to 2/3 of the clematis in place (always removing unproductive top growth), it will flower earlier. Lateness and earliness in large-flowered hybrids is controlled by when you prune it. Even the *Clematis viticella* hybrids will flower a little earlier if you don't want to hard prune them, but they will add a lot of new growth before flowering again. Large-flowered hybrids capable of producing double blossoms should not be hard pruned, since the best blooms will come off the old wood.