



# Clematis *with* American Roots

WHEN MOST people think of clematis, they imagine eye-catching hybrids such as wine-red ‘Ernest Markham’, lavender-blue ‘Ramona’ with its rounded sepals, or double ‘Duchess of Edinburgh’ with flowers like crumpled damask napkins. Or they may know and grow smaller-flowered, mass-blooming species such as snowy *Clematis terniflora* and golden *C. tangutica*.

But gardeners who are interested in integrating more North American natives in their landscapes may be surprised to find great diversity among our own less publicized clematis. “Most people come into the

Our bashful native clematis don’t get the attention of the flashy-flowered hybrids, but they are elegant enough to deserve a space in the garden.

BY CAROL HOWE

genus through the large-flowered hybrids,” says Linda Beutler, author of *Gardening with Clematis* and curator of the Rogerson Clematis Collection in West Linn, Oregon. “These plants have been made difficult to grow by contradictory pruning advice, and these are the only clematis prone to wilt disease. The native clematis, on the other hand, have a great deal more charm and subtlety. Natives are immune to wilt disease. Also, native clematis are super companion plants, wandering through shrubs and over dwarf conifers without being so massive or heavy as to disturb their host. Some North American species, like *Clematis crispa*, *C. texensis*, and *C. viorna*, have a very long period of bloom.”

Native clematis can be found in most regions of North America, from northwest Canada to Baja California and from Florida to Nova Scotia, although the majority of species are clustered in the East and Northwest. Among the best known are *C. crispa*, a southeastern native with

lavender flowers that sometimes have a pale margin; *C. hirsutissima*, a deep mauve- to violet-flowered native of the Northwest; and *C. texensis*, a scarlet to magenta native of Texas.

## SOME FAMILY HISTORY

Clematis are members of the buttercup or crowfoot family (Ranunculaceae). The genus name is derived from the Greek word *klema*, which means a climbing or branching vine. There are more than 250 known species, most originating in the temperate regions of both hemispheres, and in excess of 2,500 selections.

wife of publisher Abner Doubleday—took much notice of our native species. The exception to this neglect was scarlet or Texas clematis (*C. texensis*). As the only clematis with red flowers, scarlet clematis was cherished by breeders, who employed it to bestow its singular hue—as well as vigorous growth, long season of bloom, and tolerance of heat and humidity—on numerous hybrids and selections.

## TEXENSIS AND THE LEATHER FLOWERS

The undisputed star of North American clematis, scarlet clematis (Zones 5–9, 9–1) is native to Texas and surrounding



Hybrid clematis that have been developed using scarlet clematis include bicolor pink-flowered ‘Duchess of Albany’, above, and red-sepaled ‘Gravetye Beauty’, opposite.

The colorful “petals” of clematis are actually sepals that surround a cluster of usually contrasting-colored stamens. Although clematis can have between four and eight sepals, most of the North American native species have four.

Clematis became popular in Europe in the early 1800s, but on this side of the Atlantic, only naturalists such as Neltje Blanchan—a late 19th-century writer and

states. Its nodding, urn-shaped flowers, which arise from new wood between July and October, can range from scarlet to a dull reddish purple. The flowers narrow at the point where the thick sepals open and curl backwards, revealing a glimpse of a pink to yellow interior. Scarlet clematis thrives in a site in full sun (with roots in shade, if possible) and tolerates heat quite well.

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In clematis circles, the species and its many hybrids are collectively described as the Texensis group. Perhaps the most highly regarded of the selections is ‘Duchess of Albany’, prized for its prolific, bicolor-pink flowers that bloom over a long period, followed by decorative seedpods. Other notable cultivars are ‘Gravetye Beauty’ (red), ‘Etoile Rose’ (rosy pink), and ‘Princess Diana’ (bicolor pink).

Related to *C. texensis* are several other North American clematis species featuring four tough, thick sepals that are joined to form nodding, urn-shaped blossoms with reflexed (upward curling) tips. The thickness of the sepals led to several species—including *C. viorna*, *C. versicolor*, *C. crispa*, and *C. addisonii*—becoming known by the common name “leather flower.” Some taxonomists lump together clematis with these characteristics as the Viorna group. Most are low-growing vines with delicate flowers, ideal for placement on a trellis in a partly shaded border or being allowed to cascade gracefully over small nearby shrubs.

*Clematis viorna* (Zones 4–9, 9–1), sometimes called vase vine, is found in gravelly soils from New York west to Illinois and south to Georgia and the Gulf Coast. Its sepals are mostly reddish purple, but the tips—which may curl upward like elfin shoes—reveal a greenish or creamy white interior when the flowers open in midsummer. It grows seven to nine feet tall on a trellis or with the support of nearby shrubs. The late garden writer Christopher Lloyd compared the golden seedheads that form in late summer to many-legged “tropical spiders.”

*Clematis versicolor* (Zones 5–9, 9–1) is found from Kentucky and Tennessee west to Missouri, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. It has small but numerous summer to early fall flowers on a seven- to 12-foot vine. Its sepals are rosy pink on the outside, fading to almost white towards the tips.

Addison’s clematis (*C. addisonii*, Zones 5–8, 8–3), restricted in the wild to limestone and dolomitic glades and banks in western Virginia, is a bushy plant that reaches only one to three feet in height. Distinctive heart-shaped leaves are borne on almost nonexistent leaf stalks. Its leathery sepals are deep reddish purple on the outside and creamy white inside. When the solitary early to midsummer flowers



“Leather flower” clematis species that have bell-shaped flowers composed of four thick, reflexed sepals include vase vine (*Clematis viorna*), top, and swamp leather vine (*C. crispa*), above.

## TIPS FOR GROWING CLEMATIS IN THE GARDEN

### LIGHT REQUIREMENTS AND SOIL

Select a site for your clematis where its roots will be protected from direct sun during the hottest part of the day in summer, but the foliage will receive at least filtered sunlight. For most native species, a slightly acidic to neutral soil is ideal. In general, clematis thrive in rich, loamy, free-draining soil, so if your soil is heavy clay or too sandy, be sure to add leaf mold, compost, or other well-rotted organic material to the planting site. After planting, water the site thoroughly with a slow-running hose, then add an inch of light-colored mulch around—but not touching—the plant’s base to help keep the roots cool and deter weeds.

When it comes to soil pH, says Linda Beutler, author of *Gardening with Clematis*, “generally, the southeastern U.S. clematis species—those in the Viorna group—will adapt to a wider range of garden conditions than our Northwest species do.”

Clematis that do require neutral or alkaline soil—especially low-growing, herbaceous types such as Fremont’s leather flower (*C. fremontii*) and whitehair leather flower (*C. albicoma*)—are good choices for containers or troughs. “Something slow-release like crushed oystershells does wonders for these plants in acidic soil areas,” Beutler adds.

### PRUNING

Different types of clematis have different pruning requirements. Scarlet clematis and the species in the leather flower group all bloom on new wood, and thus should be pruned to

near ground level each year while dormant. Western species such as *C. occidentalis* var. *grosseserrata* and *C. columbiana*, on the other hand, bloom on old wood and should only be thinned occasionally to stimulate new growth.

### PROPAGATION

Many nurseries sell potted clematis (see “Sources,” page 26), but some of the native species may only be available as seed.

Clematis seeds germinate fairly rapidly if sown shortly after they ripen in early fall, but seeds that have been stored for more than a few weeks may need several cycles of cold and heat to germinate. Clematis fruits—technically achenes—have a prominent hairy “tail” that should be removed before seeds are sown, says Beutler. “For the Viorna group, the seeds are large and the seed coat (pericarp) is tough, so I soak them for five days at room temperature and then peel off the pericarp before sowing,” she adds.

Following the advice of seed germination guru Norman Deno (author of *Seed Germination Theory and Practice*), Susan Austin, owner of Completely Clematis in Ipswich, Massachusetts, sows her native clematis seeds on moist paper towels and places them inside resealable plastic bags. These are then stored in the refrigerator, and checked weekly for germination (or evidence of mold). Once the seeds start to germinate, she carefully transfers them into individual pots and places them under grow lights.

—David J. Ellis, Editor

bloom on their long stalks, the sepal tips curl back to reveal a downy interior.

Sometimes known as blue jasmine, swamp leather vine, or curly clematis, *C. crispa* (Zones 5–9, 9–5) also has downturned flowers, but with more delicate sepals than other “leather flowers.” The sepals—distinguished by ruffled edges and strongly reflexed tips that often curl back on themselves—are pale blue to lavender with a lighter band on the interior midrib of each, forming a star around the central cream-colored stamens. The blooms may be few in number, but they reappear continuously from May to September and have a light fragrance.

Swamp leather vine grows from six to nine feet tall and is native from Pennsylvania west to Missouri and south to Texas and Florida, where it is often found growing in forests, along riverbanks, and in marshy areas. Its stems usually die to the ground in winter, and in the northern extent of its range, the crown of the plant should be protected from frost with a lay-



Woodbine is a vigorous climbing clematis that has numerous white summer flowers and attractive seedheads in autumn.

er of organic mulch. Linda Beutler lists *C. crispa* among her 10 favorite clematis. “What’s not to like?” she asks, rhetorically.

“It’s easy to grow, fragrant, with a long season of bloom, followed by boisterous seedheads that are easy to germinate if you want more. The charming flowers earn their ‘crispa’ chops by being as crenulated as a square-dance petticoat.”

Swamp leather vine’s genes have been incorporated in a number of hybrids, including the well regarded selection ‘Betty Corning’ (Zones 4–10, 9–4), which bears lavender to pale purple flowers.

### FREE-CLIMBING CLEMATIS

In sharp contrast to the low-growing, delicate leather flower group is woodbine (*C. virginiana*, Zones 4–9, 9–1), a vigorous climber that can reach 20 feet. Look for it trailing over plants and bushes in moist woods or along stream banks from Nova Scotia to Georgia and west as far as Manitoba and Tennessee. Although it blooms from July through September, woodbine is better known for its fall display of plummy silver seedheads than for its unspectacular small creamy white flowers. Known by several common

## Sources

**Alplains**, Kiowa, CO. (303) 621-2247. [www.alplains.com](http://www.alplains.com).  
**Brushwood Nursery**, Athens, GA. (706) 389-0689. [www.gardenvines.com](http://www.gardenvines.com).  
**Completely Clematis Nursery**, Ipswich, MA. (978) 356-3197. [www.clematisnursery.com](http://www.clematisnursery.com).  
**Joy Creek Nursery**, Scappoose, OR. (503) 543-7474. [www.joycreek.com](http://www.joycreek.com).  
**Shooting Star Nursery**, Georgetown, KY. (866) 405-7979. [www.shootingstarnursery.com](http://www.shootingstarnursery.com).  
**Woodlanders, Inc.**, Aiken, SC. (803) 648-7522. [www.woodlanders.net](http://www.woodlanders.net).

## Resources

**Gardening With Clematis: Design and Cultivation** by Linda Beutler. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2004.  
**Guide to Growing and Propagating Wildflowers of the United States and Canada** by William Cullina. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA, 2000.  
**International Clematis Society**, [www.clematisinternational.com](http://www.clematisinternational.com).

names—including old man’s beard, virgin’s bower, and my personal favorite, devil’s darning needles—it is sometimes confused with non-native sweet autumn clematis (*C. terniflora*), but the flowers lack fragrance. In the eastern United States, woodbine grows so vigorously and self-sows so readily that it can become a bit of a nuisance, especially in small gardens, but it is less rambunctious in the western part of its range.

Its western counterpart, usually called virgin’s bower, is *C. ligusticifolia* (Zones 5–9, 9–4), native from western Canada south to California and Mexico and east to the Rockies. It grows to 20 feet tall or more, with clusters of small white flowers in late spring and decorative seedheads in autumn.

Native exclusively to California and bordering coastal Mexico, chaparral clematis (*C. lasiantha*, Zones 5–8, 8–5) is another white-flowered option. It can grow up to 20 feet tall, developing woody stems where fully hardy. It bears showy flowers composed of white sepals surmounted by pincushion clusters of prominent yellow stamens in spring, and then offers a second flush of ornamentation via its silky fall seedpods.

In its native habitat in the Pacific Northwest, rock clematis, above, grows in full sun on limestone-based soil. Fremont’s leather flower, right, native to alkaline sites in the lower Midwest and South, forms bushy clumps to two feet tall and is a good option for troughs.

### CLEMATIS IN THE WEST

In addition to *C. ligusticifolia* and *C. lasiantha*, there are several clematis from western North America worth considering. One of the widest ranging native clematis is purple clematis or bell rue (*C. occidentalis*, formerly *C. verticillaris*, Zones 3–8, 8–3). Along with its two botanical varieties (described later), it encompasses a vast native range from British Columbia to eastern Quebec, south to Wisconsin and northeastern Iowa and east as far as West Virginia and New England.

The species, which inhabits the eastern part of the range, is a woody-stemmed six- to 10-foot climber that thrives in forested areas with rocky, alkaline soil. It has broad, drooping, almost translucent, lavender to purple-blue, downy sepals. Arising singly from leaf axils or branch tips, the flowers



can reach two inches long but rarely open fully. Its botanical varieties are *C. occidentalis* var. *dissecta*, a three-foot climber with rosy pink to purple flowers, found in the Cascade Mountains of Washington, and the indigo-flowered *C. occidentalis* var. *grosseserrata*, found in Alaska, northwest Canada, and south to Colorado.



The range of *C. occidentalis* overlaps that of a related species (some sources list it as a subspecies of *C. occidentalis*) called rock clematis (*C. columbiana*, Zones 4–7, 7–3), which has purple to blue, May-blooming flowers with translucent sepals that are even broader than those of its more eastern relative. Rock clematis is found from British Columbia and Alberta south to Oregon and Colorado.

Another western species, native to meadows and high desert from Washington and Oregon west to South Dakota and south to New Mexico and Arizona, is hairy clematis (*C. hirsutissima*, Zones 4–7, 7–3). Also known as sugar bowls, its rounded, leathery, downturned flowers are formed of deep purple sepals that curl back at the very tips to reveal creamy stamens within. Sugar bowls rarely grows more than two feet tall, and both its foliage and sepals are covered with fine silvery hairs. It can be grown in a sunny border with free-draining soil, a rock garden, or a container. A botanical variety, *C. hirsutissima* var. *scottii*, differs from the species in having bipinnate leaves, sepals that are a paler shade of lavender, and growing up to a foot taller.

### MIDWEST CLEMATIS

In the harsh climate of the Midwest prairies, certain native clematis tend to be more herbaceous in habit. Fremont’s leather flower (*C. fremontii*, Zones 4–7, 7–4), for instance, grows only one to two feet tall, forming dense clumps in sites where it is happy. Native to Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri, its nodding flowers bloom in early summer in shades from purple to white. Fremont’s leather flower is endemic to sites underlain with limestone, so it does require neutral to slightly alkaline soil.

A more vinelike species, growing six to 10 feet tall, is bluebill (*C. pitcheri*, Zones 4–9, 9–4), native from Indiana south to Mississippi and west to Nebraska and Texas. It is distinguished by five ribbed sepals that are pale lavender or rose on the outside and ruby red to purple inside. Creamy to greenish white stamens provide a lovely contrast to the sepals. Its large leaves are divided into seven to nine occasionally lobed leaflets.

### MAKING ROOM FOR NATIVE CLEMATIS

These species are just a few of the many that are native to our continent. It’s fun to discover these clematis on rambles in the



‘Betty Corning’, a hybrid whose parents include vase vine (*Clematis crispa*) and *C. viticella*, grows to six to 10 feet tall. From midsummer into fall, it bears hundreds of dainty, lightly fragrant, pale purple flowers with eye-catching white markings.

woods, and even more exciting when you realize a number of them are actually in cultivation (for a list of nurseries that carry some of these species, see “Sources,” page 26). Some are ideal for naturalizing a corner of your garden. Others will look terrific in the border as late season adornments for a small shrub whose spring flowers are long gone. Still others can be trained up a small trellis or grown over an arbor.

And finally, don’t be discouraged by any reports about the finickiness of the native

species. “I find native clematis much easier to grow and tougher than a lot of the hybrids,” says Susan Austin, who runs Completely Clematis nursery in Ipswich, Massachusetts. “I wish more people knew about them because they are worthy garden plants.”

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