

Ask a Master Gardener

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by Shelly Murphy, Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer

Why is My Clematis Dying?

Q. Last month I planted a Clematis vine that had huge periwinkle blooms. Now the leaves are turning brown and it looks like it's dying. What did I do wrong? Is there anything I can do to save this plant?

A. Large-flowered clematis in bloom is a sight to behold. But in our hot, humid climate, the vine then goes into decline and looks unsightly for a time. The plant reminds me of a new mother who has birthed a beautiful baby, leaving her depleted and utterly exhausted. With clematis, however, it's the gardener who suffers postpartum depression.

Rest assured you likely did nothing wrong. It is simply the nature of this plant. That's why it is best not to use Clematis alone as a focal point. Browning, unsightly foliage doesn't mean the plant has died, so don't yank it out or cut it back. Interspersing it with other plants will help hide this ugly foliage.

Clematis does well with roses and other vines and shrubs, climbing up trees and rambling over fences and mailboxes. For several years I enjoyed the combination of Confederate Jasmine and Clematis 'The President' on my arbor. In late spring the Jasmine also bore fragrant small white blossoms. After an unusually cold winter blitzed them, I planted them a second time and they froze to death again. Even though Confederate Jasmine is supposedly hardy in zones 7–11 (Carroll County is in zone 7b), it obviously prefers warmer climates.

In different years I have planted purple hyacinth bean, moonflower, and black-eyed Susan vines on my arbor. But these annuals from seed do not grow fast enough to hide the ugly clematis foliage until mid-summer. Vines such as Carolina Jessamine, cross vine, climbing hydrangea, evergreen Clematis Armandii or Five-leaf Akebia are other options, although the latter two might become overpowering.

There are 250 varieties of Clematis. It is found world-wide and most are deciduous. Some are fragrant. They come in all shapes and sizes. Colors include shades of pink, blue, purple, red, white and even yellow. The International Clematis Society website: www.clematisinternational.com has lots of good information.

Lindy Broder, a member of the International Clematis Society, has 200 clematis growing in her garden south of Atlanta. When she spoke to our Master Gardener group several years ago, she claimed integrifolia (bushy non-climbing varieties with numerous smaller flowers and a longer bloom period) do best here. Her top five for extended bloom in Georgia are: C. 'Arabella' (integrifolia); C. 'Baltyk' (early large); C. 'Betty Corning' (viticella); C. 'Blue Boy' (integrifolia); and C. 'Duchess of Albany' (texensis). While only large-flowered varieties are available locally, others can be purchased online.

She cautions against planting the popular and common Sweet Autumn Clematis, as it will soon sprout all over your yard. Instead, plant native 'Virgin's Bower.' Though its blooms are not as prolific, it attracts hummingbirds and bees while the invasive one does not.

Clematis are not hard to care for but their requirements do need to be met. They like their branches in the sun and their roots in the shade. Most need some type of support or other plant to twine around. They do best in rich, moist, but well-drained soil with lots of organic matter and nutrients. The soil should be slightly alkaline, so add lime, but only when necessary. Always keep roots mulched, but not more than 3 inches deep. To avoid stem rot, don't allow mulch to touch the stems.

Any pruning should be done in late February and depends on when the plant flowers. Those that bloom on new wood should be cut back to about 12 inches. Those that bloom on last year's stems should only be pruned to remove dead wood or to manage size and shape. Some bloom on both new and old wood. If you don't know which type you have, watch it for a year. Then prune accordingly.

About the only disease they are susceptible to is Clematis Wilt. If suspected, cut out the foliage below the wilted branches so that it won't go into the stems and kill the plant. If done soon enough the plant can usually be saved.

So be patient and give your Clematis regular care. Next spring it will likely revive and reward you with another display of outstanding blooms.

For answers to any gardening questions, contact a Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.