

Clematis for the Western States—One Approach

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Our initial involvement with clematis began about 7 years ago, when we shipped young plants from Holland and Canada to wholesale growers in California and Utah. One year of success was followed by two in which suppliers failed us miserably with poor quality, numerous shortages, and heavy substitutions. It was this repeated frustration that led us to look for a new clematis source.

In 1991, I met Raymond Evison of Great Britain, who is certainly one of the world's authorities on clematis. Soon we became a distributor of his young bareroot plants in California and other western states.

During Raymond's first visit to southern California, we toured a number of wholesale and retail nurseries to evaluate the local clematis market. We noted the presence of *Clematis armandii* in fair numbers. This native to central and southern China (Evison, 1991) is one of the few evergreen clematis and has very fragrant flowers in March and April. Its mature growth is frost-hardy to 15F, making the plant a natural for our mild southern-California climate.

We also found a few cultivars of *C. montana*, a species from the Himalayas that is hardy to about 10F. Like *C. armandii*, the *C. montana* cultivars flower in March and April in the south of our state. They are also very vigorous and are often seen covering entire fences, old barns, and other such structures.

Most abundant in our informal survey of retailers were the large-flowering hybrid *Clematis*, including old standbys \times *jackmanii*, 'Nelly Moser', and 'The President'. While in reasonable supply, mature plants were seldom seen in the landscape, likely due to our dry summers, we felt. These plants can be grown in Southern California, but require careful attention to detail in terms of planting location and watering.

We began thinking in terms of our indigenous clematis species. *Jepson's Manual of California Native Plants* (Jepson, 1993) lists three native clematis for our state: *C. lasiantha*, *C. ligusticifolia*, and *C. pauciflora*. The *C. lasiantha* and *C. pauciflora* species are found in chaparral and woodlands below 700 ft and flower from January to June. *Clematis ligusticifolia* is found at higher elevations in riparian habitats and ranges from California north to British Columbia, east to North Dakota, and south to New Mexico. Vines will grow to 40 ft in length and the plants typically are found sprawling through willows, cottonwoods, oaks, and various native trees and shrubs, flowering in June through September. All three species have lovely seedheads, inspiring the common name of "old man's beard" for *C. ligusticifolia* and, in Mexico, "barba de chivo" or "goat's beard" for *C. lasiantha* (Roberts, 1989).

While these plants have their place in nature, and are commercially produced by some native plant nurseries for revegetation purposes, they are not desirable for their ornamental effect. This is due perhaps, in part, to their relatively small flowers and their extremely vigorous growth habits.

With further awareness of our native species and their behavior in our southern California climate, we determined there was a range of Mediterranean species and cultivars that were worthy of trialing.

Clematis cirrhosa is an evergreen species native to Southern Europe and North Africa. The cultivar *C. cirrhosa* var. *balearica* 'Freckles', introduced in 1989 by Evison (1991) has very dense foliage and 2-inch, creamy-pink flowers with red spots. The plants flower here in both winter and summer, and, like our native *Clematis*, will sometimes lose their leaves in late summer. In my garden, with summer irrigation, the plant has been nearly too vigorous and the nodding flowers not quite so visible, but grown properly the plant can make a very nice specimen.

The species, *C. viticella*, is from Italy and perhaps Spain, and seemed like a natural for our very dry and harsh Southern California summers. The species and its forms are fully hardy to -13F. While having smaller (2 to 3 inch) blooms than the early, large-flowering hybrids, the *C. viticella* cultivars are quite showy and are well-suited for growing over other plants or for climbing upright through trees and shrubs, much as our native clematis behave. These plants typically begin flowering in May and June here and then flower off and on all through the summer and early fall.

Our customers have had very good success with cultivars like: 'Madame Julia Correvon', a plant reaching about 11 ft with wine-red flowers; 'Little Nell', with many whitish-blue flowers; and 'Polish Spirit', a relatively new deep purple-blue introduction from Poland. At present, we are looking at others for our market, including 'Alba Luxurians', a white with reflexed, green-tipped tepals; 'Blue Belle', recently introduced to the U.S.A., is a vigorous blue-violet with yellow anthers; 'Minuet', a white with mauve veins; and 'Venosa Violacea', a larger flowering white with purple veins.

Still another Mediterranean species that may do well in our California climate is *C. campaniflora*. This native of Portugal has very pretty white to pale-blue, bell-shaped flowers that appear in July and August. The plant is rather vigorous and will reach a height of 10 ft.

Based upon these observations in southern California, one could look at the native clematis species of the other western states as a means of determining what other species and cultivars might perform well in these areas.

Moving to the east is our neighbor, Arizona. *Clematis ligusticifolia* also exists in the wild here, again in riparian environments. A second species, *C. drummondii*, a native of Baja California, is cultivated by some specialty nurseries for landscape purposes.

The extreme summer temperatures and very low humidity of the lower Arizona deserts are not well-suited to any of the large-flowered hybrid *Clematis*, although with extreme diligence and careful attention to shade and watering one might have some success with the smaller flowered hybrids. At the higher elevations of the Prescott Valley and Flagstaff, the *C. montana*, *C. viticella*, and large flower hybrids should perform fairly well, but are rarely seen.

New Mexico and Colorado can claim *C. ligusticifolia* as a native plant as well; it is found in these states from 3000 to 8000 ft along roads and in moist canyons (Carter, 1988). There are at least four other native or naturalized *Clematis* known to these parts of the rockies: *C. columbiana*, *C. hirsutissima*, *C. orientalis*, and *C. pseudoalpina*.

The native *C. columbiana* is found in a large area of the west, ranging from Chihuahua, Mexico to British Columbia. The species grows from 2000 to 10,000 ft. among sagebrush and pines and its blue to purple flowers are found spring through summer.

Clematis hirsutissima, or sugar bowls, is another common native that is found from New Mexico to Montana and west to Washington and Nevada. This species has pale-blue to purple campanulate flowers and is found in canyons and on hillsides from 5000 to 9000 ft.

Clematis orientalis is a native of Turkey that has naturalized over a great part of the western U.S. There remain arguments about the correct identification of this species here; ours is probably a hybrid between *C. tangutica* and *C. orientalis*. This plant is found from 6000 to 8000 ft., often in dense tangles along streams (Kelly, 1970). Beautiful nodding yellow flowers appear in late summer, followed by attractive seedheads that remain all winter.

The fourth species is *C. pseudoalpina*, which may also be known as *C. alpina* var. *occidentalis* in the literature (Means, 1993). This plant is found in shady places and is small, with scrambling vines up to 5 ft in length, flowering May through July. It is this species that is most like *Clematis alpina*, the native species of the European Alps.

This close relationship suggests that many of the cultivars of *C. alpina* would be worthy of greater garden use in these states. They are some of the earliest flowering clematis, beginning in April, are fully hardy; the species *C. alpina* ssp. *siberica* has even been reported flowering in the north of Norway, within the Arctic Circle (Fisk, 1994). Unlike many other *Clematis*, the *C. alpina* forms tolerate open and exposed conditions (Brickell et al., 1989). Some of the cultivars to look out for include 'Columbine White'; 'Willy', a pink with some summer flowers; and 'Helsingborg', a deep purple.

The Chinese compliment of the *C. alpina* species is *C. macropetala*. Also from the high mountain regions, the species and its cultivars are well-adapted to extreme cold and low humidity and do very well in our Rocky Mountain states. The macropetalas all flower in early April and have slightly open, semi-double flowers. There are at least eight cultivars that are commercially available, including 'Markham's Pink', 'White Swan', and 'Jan Lindmark'.

The native *Clematis* of Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana are almost the same as those of Colorado (Welsh, 1987). Given the climates of all of these mountain states, the hardy *C. alpina* and *C. macropetala* species and cultivars are very good choices for early flowering. They may be complemented with selections of the montanas and viticellas and large-flowered hybrids for later flowering in the season, although the latter group would require some cold protection.

The native clematis of Washington, Oregon, Northern California, and British Columbia have already been discussed and include: *C. columbiana*, *C. ligusticifolia*, and *C. pseudoalpina*. Other species in evidence, depending upon reference sources, include *C. douglasii* and *C. occidentalis* ssp. *grosserrata* (Huxley et al., 1992).

The climate in many parts of this region is much like southern England, normally with ample rainfall and relatively mild winters. Those of us who are not from the Pacific Northwest can be quite envious, for all of the groups of clematis can be grown here. This area is particularly known for the early, large-flowering hybrids, including 'Asao', 'Fireworks', 'Haku-oôkan', 'Niobe', and 'Snow Queen', as well as many later flowering hybrids like 'Ernest Markham', and 'Madame Edouard André'.

A few more recent introductions of the large-flowered hybrids would include 'Arctic Queen', a superb and very free-flowering new double white; 'Blue Ravine'

a UBC introduction with 8-inch, blue-mauve flowers with red anthers; 'Guernsey Cream', perfect for a shady position with 5-inch, creamy-yellow flowers; 'Masarad' (syn. 'Masquerade'), with mauve-blue flowers 6 inches across with light-brown centers; and 'Multi Blue', a deep blue with double-centered tepals tipped with white.

This has been a very brief look at *Clematis* for production in a very large geographic area. There are a number of other species from Europe, the Mediterranean, and New Zealand that would also be worthy of trials or more frequent use in this region, including the shrub forms of the herbaceous *C. heracleifolia*.

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