

Clematis Pruning

After a long winter, typical clematis vines look shriveled and unruly, and gardeners want to prune them. Here are some tips for successful pruning.

FIRST SEASON AFTER PLANTING, early in the spring, clean up your young clematis vine by cutting it back to two or three pairs of strong buds near the base. Thereafter, clematis can be divided into three main groups, each with different pruning requirements.

SPRING BLOOMERS produce many small blooms early in the season (usually April) on last years growth. Prune out dead/weak stems or reduce the plant size by pruning after blooming in the spring. If you need to reduce size, leave some strong healthy buds or shoots for regrowth to start from. Spring bloomers include montana, spooneri, alpine, macropetala, and evergreen types of clematis.

LARGE FLOWERED OR REPEAT BLOOMING varieties have their main bloom cycle in May and June, and may repeat bloom in late summer. They make up the majority of the clematis types available. Clean up or lightly shape them in March when the growth buds are swollen fuzzy and white. Remove dead/weak stems with stunted buds, and remove stems that aren't where you want them. If you remove main stems at this time, the plant will survive but produce fewer blooms. Flowering will be delayed until later in the summer. If you have a large flowered type which you want to cut back hard, the best time is in early summer, as blooming ends. Large flowered types include 'Nelly Moser' and most other types with blooms more than five inches across. Double flowering varieties also fall in this pruning group.

SUMMER BLOOMING clematis bloom repeatedly on new growth. You can neaten them up by removing tangled, unsightly growth back to 3 to 5 main stems in late fall. Cut them back hard to a few strong bud pairs nearer the ground in March. Look for big fuzzy white buds and cut back to them, removing dead/weak stems. Severe pruning of these varieties promotes more vigorous new growth on which the summer blooms are displayed. Summer bloomers include the viticella types and Jackmanni. They produce smaller blooms in great profusion.



Sweet autumn clematis loosely fit into this pruning group, but should be cut back less severely.

OVERGROWN CLEMATIS

When substantially reducing the size of an older clematis, start by cutting out the weakest stems and always leave some vigorous stems or strong buds for growth to start out from. If you cut back too far down, leaving no shoots or buds, you may kill the vine. It may be necessary to cut back an overgrown clematis in stages over several years rather than all at once. To sacrifice the fewest blooms and more easily discern vigorous and weak stems, do any severe pruning of small flowered types in spring, and large flowered types in June.

If you choose not to prune, your clematis will thrive provided it receives food, good drainage, and a cool root zone. Clematis love compost. Unpruned plants usually grow less vigorously and bloom less heavily than those with good pruning management, so use proper pruning to keep your plant neat and maximize bloom.

Additional reading:

<https://pacifichorticulture.org/articles/clematis-go-native-in-the-pacific-northwest/>

<https://depts.washington.edu/hortlib/pal/pruning-clematis/>

<https://clematisinseattle.com/2013/01/10/clematis-pruning-part-1/>