

If left untended, even the 'queen of climbers' can become an unruly tangle. David Jewell cuts through the mystery surrounding clematis care

**OVER THE YEARS**, the subject of pruning clematis has been made far more complicated than it needs to be. I am often asked, 'How, if, and when should I prune the clematis in my garden?' Many plant centres provide pruning advice on their labels, but their guidance is not always clear or accurate.

Apart from a few herbaceous kinds, clematis are twining climbers. Their long, thin stems are woody but individually fragile when young; they cling to each other, creating a dense thatch of old growth from which the new shoots climb ever higher in search of light.

In a domestic garden, were you to leave the plants unpruned, after a few seasons the flowers would be out of view. Pruning controls the height and spread and aims to achieve the maximum amount of healthy foliage and number of flowers at eye level. Only when growing a clematis into a tree, where it is completely impractical to attempt any pruning, should it be allowed to run without pruning; as a natural scrambler it will be happy to do so.

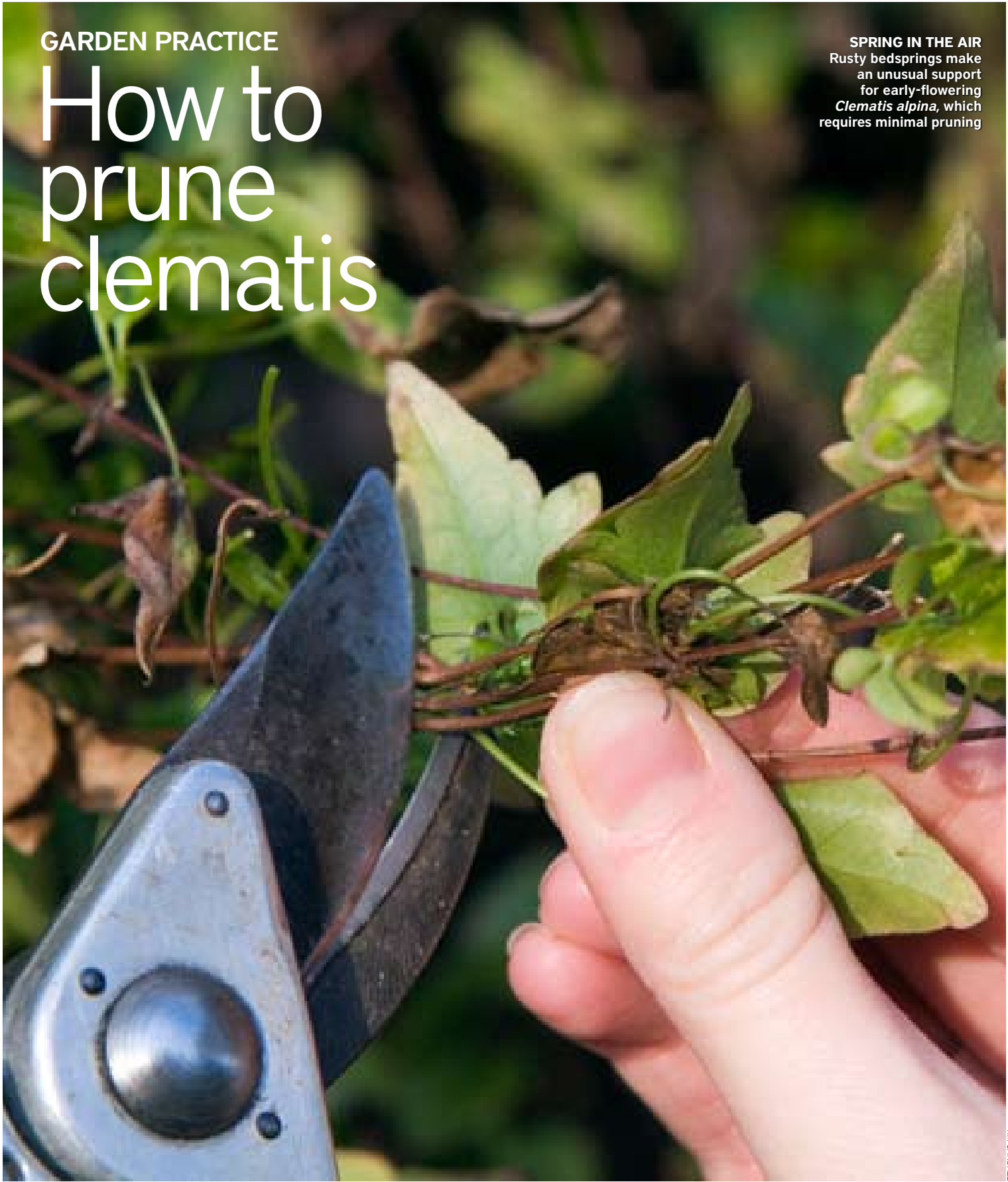
Unfortunately, due to their varied vigour and growth habits, there is no single, easy-to-follow rule for the annual pruning of all clematis. Various kinds flower at different times throughout the year (see *The Garden*, October 2008, pp662-667) but fortunately their flowering time indicates to gardeners how to prune them.

Most clematis will fit into one of three pruning groups. Those that flower early in the year produce their flowers on the previous season's growth, and need minimal pruning until they get out of hand; the mid-season ones flower on their old growth in late spring or early summer, and may also have an autumn crop of smaller flowers on the current season's shoots; the late-flowering kinds only flower on the current season's growth and are therefore pruned hard back in early spring. As a safe and simple rule, if the plant flowers before the end of June, just give it a light tidying; anything that flowers after that date will require more vigorous pruning.

Don't shy away from clematis because you are nervous about pruning them. Keep it simple, look after them and enjoy these versatile and glorious climbers. ■

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**i** David Jewell will give a demonstration of clematis pruning at RHS Garden Wisley, Sunday 15 February; £11 members; £19.50 non-members. Tel 0845 612 1253 to book



### Pruning group 1: early-season flowering (winter to late spring)

Includes *Clematis alpina*, *C. macropetala*, *C. montana*, *C. armandii*, *C. cirrhosa* and their cultivars.

All that this group requires is a light trimming and basic tidying and removal of any dead or weak stems during spring, immediately after flowering. After pruning, new growth is produced that ripens as the season progresses to produce flowers for the next spring or early summer.

With *C. montana*, its cultivars, and others in the Montana Group, in order to keep a plant constrained (if growing it over a balcony, for example) it can be regularly trimmed after flowering, up until June. At that point you must stop pruning because it needs to make new growth and new wood to ripen and produce flowers for the following year.

When you are dealing with *C. alpina*, *C. macropetala*, *C. cirrhosa* and their cultivars, you may need to remove some of the older growth completely in the interest of regenerating the plant (removing tired old wood will promote fresh, new flowering growth). This, again, must be done soon after it has finished flowering.

● See p110 for pruning groups 2 & 3 ►



*Clematis* 'Apple Blossom' (top right)  
*C. montana* var. *grandiflora* (right)





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### Pruning group 2: mid-season flowering (late spring to early summer)

Includes Early Large-flowered Group hybrids such as 'Nelly Moser', 'H.F. Young', 'Barbara Jackman', 'Pink Fantasy', 'Fuji-musume' and 'Burma Star'.

The clematis cultivars that belong to this group produce their main crop of flowers from the leaf-axil buds that were produced and ripened the previous season, so this old growth must be left intact. Some cultivars also flower in autumn on their new shoots.

All dead and weak stems should be removed in early spring. At this time of year the plant is a tangle of thin wiry stems. All that is needed is to lift up and remove any

dead foliage on the outer part and locate the strong, newly emerging, fat leaf-axil buds and trim back to them (above). Essentially you are tidying the plant and removing any dead growth from previous seasons.

It is also important to stimulate fresh growth from the base of the plant by selecting two or three of the weaker stems and pruning them down to 30–60cm.

Finally, tie in stems securely with garden string or twine to prevent wind damage to young shoots.

*Clematis* 'Nelly Moser' (above left)  
*C.* 'Lemon Chiffon' (left)



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### Pruning group 3: late-season flowering (midsummer to autumn)

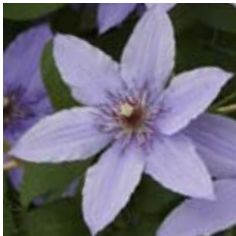
Includes Viticella Group and Late Large-flowered Group hybrids such as 'Perle d'Azur', 'Hagley Hybrid', 'Jackmanii', 'Étoile Violette' and 'Royal Velours'.

This group flowers on new stems each year, so pruning is straightforward – in late winter, cut off all the previous year's tangled shoots about 30–45cm above soil level, to stimulate good basal growth. The previous season's stems are mid-brown in colour; older ones are a paler, lighter brown (above).

Timing is crucial. If too early, new growth may be caught by cold frosts; it pays to be patient, subject to your locality. Check the new growth regularly and tie it in carefully, spaced evenly around the support.

● Recently introduced Boulevard clematis – such as *Angelique* ('Evipio 017') and *Parisienne* ('Evipio 019') – are a new generation of compact, free-flowering clematis, ideal for pots and smaller gardens. Strictly, they belong to the mid-season category, but are better pruned as late-season sorts to keep them bushy. Give them the 'pony tail cut' in spring: hold all the stems in one hand, and slice off the top growth 30cm above soil level.

*Clematis* 'Odoriba' (above right)  
Boulevard *C.* *Parisienne* ('Evipio 019') (right)



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## TIPS FOR GARDENING WITH CLEMATIS



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### Clematis through a shrub

Natural scramblers, clematis love to twist and dance their way through structural shrubs. The clematis/rose combination is the classic example – such as *C.* 'Prince Charles' with *Rosa* Berkshire ('Korpinka') (above) – the rose canopy keeps the clematis' roots cool and its spiny stems are ideal for it to cling to. Extend the idea still further by using shrubs with coloured foliage as a foil to highlight the glorious colour range of clematis. It is important to match the vigour of the clematis to its host shrub, as an even balance between the two is essential. *Clematis* 'Perle d'Azur' works well with yellow-leaved *Sambucus racemosa* 'Sutherland Gold'.

Whatever the combination, the clematis must be lightly tied in as they grow because their stems are prone to damage, especially if allowed to wave around in mid air during windy weather.



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### Newly-planted clematis

When buying a clematis, look for two things: plenty of strongly emerging stems, and a good quantity of eyes (dormant leaf buds) at soil level. With the large-flowered kinds, plant the rootball about 10cm deeper than it was in the pot, so that the eyes can send up new shoots from underground as insurance against clematis wilt.

All clematis, whichever pruning group they belong to, should be hard pruned – to 30cm above soil level – in the spring following planting (above). This encourages strong basal growth and helps to develop a good, bushy framework from the start. Failure to do so will result in one or two stems racing up to 2m or so, making an unsightly tangle with bare stems below. From the second spring after planting, carry out one of the three annual pruning regimes (see pp109–110) to ensure optimum flowering.



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### Orange-peel clematis

From midsummer, cultivars of *Clematis tangutica* such as 'Helios', 'Lambton Park', 'Bill MacKenzie', and *C. tibetana* subsp. *vernayi* (formerly *C. orientalis*) flower profusely with yellow, lantern-shaped blooms, followed by fine displays of silvery seedheads. Their pruning needs fall into group 3, but they repay a little extra care. In spring, carefully lift the tangled mass of stems, dead foliage and spent flowers and inspect the pencil-thick stems beneath. If there are clear signs of new green shoots, remove the tangled mop with sharp secateurs (above). Remove any dead or weak stems and prune strong stems down to 45cm, above a bud, carefully tying them onto their support. But delay pruning if new growth is not visible, otherwise water may penetrate the fibrous, almost flaky, stems, causing splitting and subsequent dieback.



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### Pruning herbaceous clematis

Treat this group like any other herbaceous perennial, pruning at, or near, ground level, because the new growth regenerates from the base. With some (such as *C. x aromatica*, *C.* 'Alionushka', *C. recta* and *C. integrifolia* cultivars), inspect closely as new shoots spear through the soil and remove the previous season's growth (above).

However, some herbaceous kinds, particularly the heraclefolia types with their hyacinth-like flowers, have large foliage and are quite woody at their base. In this case, look closely and prune to just above a strong bud 7.5–10cm above ground level. In borders it makes sense to lightly trim back all herbaceous clematis while tidying the garden for winter. It helps avoid wind damage and the final pruning can take place at the end of winter or early spring, subject to the season, when new growth buds are clearly visible.