



Fig. 1 *C. afoliata* in a strawberry tree. What look like tendrils are really leaves.

Clematis for year-round interest

Mike Millington's plants are an unexpectedly hardy winter bonus

Most evergreen clematis are not considered reliably hardy in most of the UK. The standard exception is *C. armandii* and its cultivars, which the RHS lists as frost hardy to -5°C , though recommending a south- or west-facing sheltered position. I haven't grown *C. armandii*, but I've grown a number of other evergreen clematis with some success.

My garden

I have a typical suburban

Clematis are best known for their summer colour, but a remarkable number are good value through the winter and surprisingly frost tolerant.

back garden about 75ft long and 35ft wide. It faces south-west, getting direct sunshine for most of the day. On the north-east it's protected by the house; a 6ft-high wooden boundary

fence gives some protection from cold, chilling winds from the north and north-west, and a 6ft-hedge offers protection from the east.

Cold hardiness

I live in the East Midlands, just north of the River Trent. The closest local weather station is at Watnall, seven miles away and at approximately the same altitude as my garden. These temperatures were recorded there during the winters of 2010–2013:

Date range	Continuous number of days below freezing.	Minimum temperature
25.11.2010 – 8.12.2010	13	-12°C
17.12.2010 – 27.12.2010	11	-9°C
1.2.2012 – 12.2.2012	12	-8°C
10.1.2013 – 26.1.2013	17	-7°C

Source: Data with permission of Weather Online Ltd website

Late November and December 2010 were remarkable not only for some of the lowest temperatures recorded in recent decades, but also for the extended periods below freezing. No fewer than 24 days in that period were below zero.

The winters of 2010–13 would be expected to test the hardiness of any but fully hardy plants, so my clematis were thoroughly tested.

Clematis species

C. afoliata (fig. 1). Bought from the (now closed) clematis nursery of Barry Fretwell in about 2003, this is an unusual plant in that it is virtually leafless, its only leaves tiny and tendril-like. It's another of those oddities that originate from New Zealand – leafless plants and flightless birds. It is dioecious, though I have never tried to determine this one's gender.

It is often described as suitable for conservatories or a sheltered position against a wall (Lloyd with Bennett¹; Evison²). Buczacki³ says it will 'scramble between shrubs in a warm, sheltered position', but 'should be considered barely hardy or tender'.

Mine was planted as

a juvenile to grow into a very small strawberry tree, *Arbutus unedo*. As the tree has grown the clematis has kept up with it, forming a canopy in the centre of its crown. Never pruned, except to snip off any dead hanging stems, it is now about 15ft high. In the open garden, about 12ft away from the house, it has protection from the north but not the east. In early spring it has a good display of creamy pale-yellow flowers. Unfortunately it can now be appreciated only by looking down on it from a bedroom window.

Some claim it is scented. I have not experienced this, possibly due to its height, or possibly due to its lack of scent (as others claim).

How much longer it will keep up with the tree is another matter. Will it survive when the tree overtakes it and it is no longer in direct sunshine all day? That will be its next test.

C. cirrhosa var. *balearica* (figs 2a, b & c)

Fairly well known as a good garden plant, many named cultivars are also available. I like the original species, and this is the second plant I have grown. The first, planted to grow up the same tree, survived for ten years then one summer it died for no obvious reason. Its replacement was planted late in 2009, just before the coldest winters in recent times.



Fig. 2a *C. cirrhosa* var. *balearica* flower buds.



Fig. 2b Maroon-speckled flowers delight on a cold winter day.



Fig. 2c Bronze foliage and seed-heads.

¹Clematis, Christopher Lloyd, revised with Tom Bennett, Viking, 1989 ² Making the Most of Clematis, Raymond J Evison, Floraprint Ltd, 1995
³ Best Clematis, Stefan Buczacki, Hamlyn, 1998



Figs 3a & b *C. urophylla* 'Winter Beauty'.



Fig. 3b

It is listed as frost hardy to -5°C in the *RHS A-Z Encyclopaedia*. Buczacki states that it is 'barely hardy', tolerating minimum temperatures of 0°C to only -5°C . Evison lists it as in hardiness zones 7–9 (-1°C to -18°C), while still recommending a sheltered south or west position. Lloyd & Bennett are

perhaps most convincing, describing a plant so widely distributed around the Mediterranean that 'some forms will be hardier than others, depending on the harshness of the climate of the region from which they originated'.

Mine grows in the open garden with an amelanchier for support. The tree is about 15ft high and in 6 years the clematis has found its way to the top. It looks rather delicate, and doesn't seem to be restricting or damaging the tree in any way.

The foliage is inconspicuous during the summer. During the winter the bronze feathery leaves are attractive close up, but its real merit is that it flowers from January to March. Lovely maroon-speckled cream bell-shaped flowers hanging from the bare branches of the tree look very good on a cold

winter day, and brighten up the garden at a particularly uninteresting time of year. It is not a massive eye-catching display, just a long succession of flowers that goes on for months in most winters.

To date I've had no need to prune it. I've noticed that every spring it sends out new growth then, oddly, in summer some of the new growth dies back.

C. urophylla 'Winter Beauty' (figs 6 & 7)

Readily available only recently, my plant was bought ten years ago specifically to grow up an ugly concrete post, with garden wire wound round it for support. The clematis did very well for several years, performed its task admirably by completely obscuring the post, looked good all year round as the glossy dark-green leaves were attractive in their own right and served well as a background for the white bell flowers during the coldest part of the winter. It came through some very cold winters, then in summer two years ago some of the bottom leaves suddenly turned black and within a couple of weeks the whole plant was dead. (A nearby tree peony had died similarly a few weeks before.)

I will try it again as it's a very good garden plant. But whether I will succeed in the same spot I don't know – if it's a fungal infection it could be still be in the soil.



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Figs 4a, b & c *C. napaulensis* attempting to cover a tree peony and a veratrum.

C. napaulensis

(figs 4a, b & c)

Barry Fretwell was reluctant to sell one of these as it was the summer, dormant period. Nonetheless he found one with signs of life and over ten years later it's still doing well.

It isn't evergreen, but winter-green. Another oddity which can work in the gardener's favour.

It has a reputation for not being particularly hardy, although the *RHS A-Z Encyclopaedia*⁴ lists it as fully hardy (it is absent from the earlier 1996 edition, suggesting it's gaining popularity). Evison recommends a sheltered position including it in hardiness zones 8–9 (down to a minimum of –12°C). Lloyd & Bennett describe it

as 'somewhat tender'.

Mine is planted in the open garden about 3ft away from a 6ft fence, giving it protection from the north and west winds. It was planted to grow through a mature tree peony, *Paeonia lutea*, 7ft high and 8ft spread; it quickly achieved

that, and then found its way halfway up a neighbouring full-sized conifer. Since the tree had to be cut down, in summer I prune it hard to keep it within the confines of the peony.

Its leaves die back in summer, but at its messiest it's covered by the peony.



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Fig. 4b



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Fig. 4c

⁴ *RHS A-Z Encyclopaedia of Garden Plants*, Dorling Kindersley, 2008

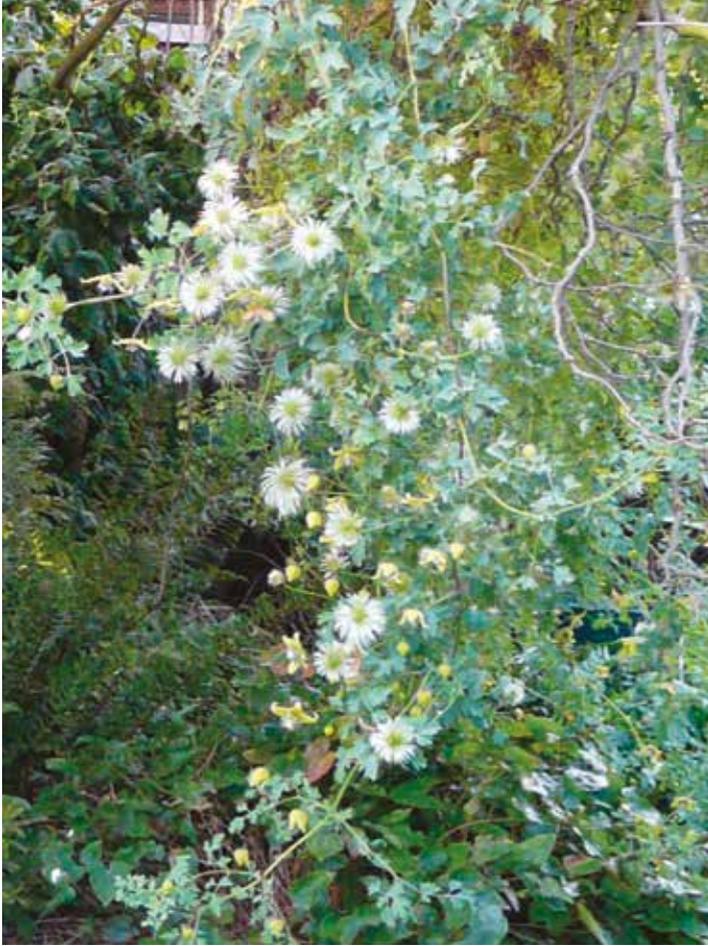


Fig. 5 *C. tibetana* subsp. *vernayi* flowers and seedheads in late summer.

In very late autumn, just as the peony is shedding its leaves, the clematis starts into growth, its bright green leaves most welcome. It cloaks the peony for the whole of the winter in a green canopy. Then at the coldest part of the year it starts flowering: fairly narrow, tubular bells of green and purple flowers that are attractive close up. *C. napaulensis* is a robust plant and stands up well to some fairly tough treatment. When the weather turns

really cold its leaves droop, and it looks as if it will keel over and die at any minute. But it has always recovered.

C. tibetana* subsp. *vernayi (fig. 5)

Although not evergreen, I'm including this because it has genuine year-round interest.

I bought it from a general-purpose garden centre rather than a specialist clematis nursery, so I hope it is correctly named. It's certainly a 'lemon peel'

clematis as the flowers are unmistakable: very thick petals resembling lemon peel, in a rather peculiar shade of greenish sulphur yellow. Most years it flowers profusely on the current season's growth in late summer, but it is not the flowers that are its best feature.

Mine grows on an old quince tree which is very susceptible to a fungus disease that turns the leaves brown. This tree is kept only as a support for the clematis, which seems immune to this disease. Nor does it suffer from the rust to which many of my deciduous clematis have succumbed without treatment. It cloaks the unsightly quince very well during the summer with its rather attractive ferny glaucous leaves.

It is in mid-winter when it's most impressive. The seedheads stay on the plant and form silver-white fluffy balls that on a bright winter day glisten in the sunshine, and really stand out when covered with frost.

It's a very robust, large plant. I prune it in spring by cutting back as much of the previous year's growth as I can reach. If left, it forms a dense impenetrable canopy that would probably finish off the tree.

C. uncinata (figs 6a)

Fergus Garrett at the Great Dixter nursery sold me this plant with the comment "That's a good one".

I wasn't sure at the time whether he meant "That's a good species" or "That's a good specimen". Either way, it turned out to be true – it has become a truly remarkable plant.

It was an established *C. uncinata* growing against a wall at Great Dixter, filling the air with scent in the midst of summer, that encouraged me to attempt to grow it. This is the only other one that I have seen growing. It is not frequently offered for sale. This is a real pity as it is a good garden plant in the right place. The *RHS Plant Finder* currently lists just one supplier, which I found was out of stock.

I planted mine about ten years ago. This was my second attempt. The first I planted in the open garden, with the intention of using a fully grown conifer as the support. It was some distance from the house and lacked protection. Even during the milder winters at that time it gave up during its first winter.

Directly outside the back of my house is a patio area, boxed in by the house and the high brick wall of my neighbour's garage at a right angle to the house, so well protected from the worst of the cold winds. This is where I planted the replacement, about 10ft away from the house and next to the brick garage wall, protected on all sides except the south-east.



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Figs 6a Looking down on *C. uncinata*, the white flowers looking golden in the winter sun

To support it I had an 8ft-square metal grid erected close to the brick wall. It proved to be hopelessly inadequate as despite its tender reputation it is big and rampant. It found its way into a neighbouring camellia, covering one side of it.

Pruning is needed only to keep it under control, so every two or three years I cut it back severely to give the camellia some space. Autumn is the best time for pruning; a radical spring pruning reduces the flowering for that season as it flowers on the current season's growth.

I think the leaves are more attractive than the more leathery ones of *C. armandii*. And whereas *C. armandii* flowers in the

spring, when scents are often missed, *C. uncinata* flowers in my garden around the middle of July. (At Great Dixter, further south, it flowers two to three weeks earlier.)

The flowers are the main reason for growing this plant. Each individual small white cruciform flower is nothing special, but en masse they form large trusses that cascade down the plant like cotton wool clouds and fill the garden (and my patio and living room) with a sweet, heady scent.

C. uncinata and *C. armandii* have similar growing habits. *Uncinata* may be less hardy but it can thrive in a suitable spot. If you have a protected site it would be well worth considering.



Fig. 6b *C. uncinata*

Afterword

These are the year-round clematis I have grown. All the successful clematis (except *C. cirrhosa*) were planted at least several years before the exceptionally hard winters of 2010 onwards. It may be that having developed good deep roots in milder times helped them to come through the harsher winters.

These clematis need little attention. Pruning is required only in order to keep the plants in check: the robust species can be hacked

hard and will come back again, the more delicate need no pruning at all.

Hardiness has not been a problem with any of these species, except my misguided attempt to grow *C. uncinata* in too exposed a position. Other losses have occurred during the warmer months for other reasons.

I also grow a number of deciduous clematis, both climbing and in herbaceous beds, but they're much better known and frequently grown. Whereas they're

often subject to fungal attack, evergreen clematis appear to be immune.

(I find that deciduous clematis respond well to a fungicidal spray early in the season as the new shoots emerge, followed by another spraying when the plant has reached full height.)

Much as I like the deciduous hybrids for their summer displays of colour, there is something very satisfying about plants that manage to be interesting all year round. 🌸

Mike Millington used his retirement in part to complete a BTEC in Horticulture at Nottingham Trent University. He is naturally drawn to the unusual, the exotic and the downright bizarre.