



Fig. 1 *C.* 'New Love'

Not since 1976 have the UK and Ireland experienced such drought, causing consternation among passionate gardeners.

Those of us who grow *Clematis* know how important it is for the soil to be moist at all times if the plants are to give a good account of themselves. Yet two garden writers have been describing *C. viticella*, of Mediterranean origin, and its cultivars as drought-resistant, needing low maintenance and little or no pruning. After almost 40 years of growing and learning about the genus, I truly do not believe there are drought-resistant species or cultivars which can endure dryness at the roots for long periods in temperate-zone gardens. To a degree, those in the *tangutica*, *heracleifolia*

and *tubulosa* groups may tolerate short dry periods. I have heard of some *heracleifolia* group plants doing well despite drought. My *C.* 'New Love' (fig. 1) showed no signs of displeasure during four weeks without rain. Its foliage is somewhat leathery!

My 20-year-old well-established *C. tibetana* subsp. *vermayi* with comparatively thick, greyish foliage was truly naked in July having lost all its foliage, but I saw new growths soon after two days' rain. A resilient clematis!

Generally speaking garden plants with silver and/or glaucous foliage prefer their feet in relatively dry soil with good drainage. They do not behave well in water-logged or heavy clay soil.

Clematis in Mediterranean and temperate zones – drought, myth & facts

Mary Toomey

Clematis in the Mediterranean zone

I recall Heidi Gildemeister, founder member of the Mediterranean Plant Society, and author of *Water Wise Gardening*, saying that Mediterranean clematis such as *C. cirrhosa*, *C. cirrhosa* var. *balearica* and *C. viticella* are adapted to dry summers and mild wet winters and some go into summer dormancy in Mediterranean gardens. She advised us not to water them during summer months. In fact my *C. cirrhosa* var. *purpurascens* 'Freckles' lost all its foliage during summer 2017 but came back fully in early autumn. At the end of July 2018 it looks very sad with withered yellowy-brown foliage and unusually not a sign of its pendulous flowers. I have no doubt it will boast handsome foliage and flowers once normal weather returns.



Fig. 2 C. 'Etoile Violette'

Clematis viticella and its cultivars may very well grow and reward Mediterranean gardeners but that does not mean they will withstand long periods of dry weather and flower well in the British Isles. Some plants such as 'Etoile Violette' (fig. 2), 'Little Nell', 'Madame Julia Correvon' (fig. 3), and others in my garden (not watered because of a hosepipe ban but heavily mulched) and elsewhere performed reasonably well but with smaller flowers and poor foliage. Where these

cultivars were in moisture-rich or well-mulched soil, watered regularly in spring, the plants did well. I noticed in an old garden that C. 'Little Nell', neither pruned, fed, nor watered, refused to give up, instead producing tiny flowers.

Time and again I have noticed that many flowering plants flower well after a lengthy dry period – albeit with smaller flowers than normal – to help the species reproduce thus assuring continuity.

In conclusion it is worth noting that a



Fig. 3 C. 'Madame Julia Correvon' with *Schefflera taiwaniana*

Mediterranean climate is typically characterised by hot, dry summers with little or no rain and plants tend to become relatively dormant during summer. On the other hand, plants growing in temperate zones need gentle summer rains to support and promote lush growth.

So while *viticella* species may very well grow satisfactorily in Mediterranean gardens, its cultivars which boast large-flowered clematis in their parentage will struggle without ample water in the British Isles. 🌸

Mary Toomey is a lecturer and the author of books on *Clematis*.