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The learning curve

Val Bourne

Fig. 1 *Clematis cirrhosa* var. *balearica*

Most Hardy Plant Society members are plant lovers and I suspect they're like me, fully paid-up members of the Shoehorn School of Gardening. Most of us are going to pack as many things as we can into our plots and we're going to use every inch of space. Age has mellowed me a little, in this respect anyway, and I have learnt to be more selective by limiting the colour palette and concentrate on a smaller range of plants. The hardest thing was persuading myself that it was sensible to buy three, five or seven of the same thing, rather than plonking one in and then wondering why my garden looked like an itsy-bitsy pincushion. Somehow, buying more than one went against my northern thriftiness. That's ridiculous, because you've still got to fill the space and, if you come to a new garden

as I did in 2004, you have to spend the money!

I long to be like Gertrude Jekyll, combining three plants in one enormously long border so that it's restful and tasteful, but my exuberant personality takes over. I have far too much energy for my own good, so my gardens have to share that same free-flowing abundance. I put this down to childhood. I was the only girl of my generation and, with two brothers and seven (or was it eight) boy cousins I had to fight my way up the male pecking order.

I find myself drawn to plants that mirror my energetic, free-flowing spirit. I like natural abundance, rather than neat and symmetrical, and I'm not keen on frilly. Most plants are either one or the other, but clematis come in every which way. The Chelsea Flower Show is full of completely symmetrical

clematis in blocks of colour, but I can't bring myself to plant them at Spring Cottage. I have to have scramblers with lots of smaller flowers so those late-summer viticellas, like 'Purpurea Plena Elegans' and 'Étoile Violette' ramble about at the back of the autumn border.

Last year I planted a vigorous, I think that's code for unruly, orange-peel tangutica-type clematis, 'Vince Denny'. Sylvia Denny introduced it in 2003, naming it after her late husband. The thick tepals form an open shape and the ends curl up. The outer tepals are a sun-baked orange red, but the inners are a warm yellow and the anthers have black tips. I'm hoping that this hard-prune clematis will cover the western end of my summerhouse, now bare after the removal of a Banksian rose that threatened to overwhelm it.

I spoke to a fellow clematis enthusiast, mentioning 'Vince Denny', and she thought it thuggish and considered that it self-seeds far too freely. I'm hoping that it's not as thuggish as the Banksian rose, which was a triffid rather than a mere thug. (I shouldn't be surprised to see this rose resurface.) The excavated root, dug up by the Best Beloved, was ten feet long. Luckily it travelled across the ground and not straight down towards Australia.

After all, my winter-flowering clematis, *C. cirrhosa* var. *balearica* (fig. 1), on the southern wall of Spring Cottage in

2005, reappeared after being removed by a digger when Spring Cottage was renovated. (The lovely vanilla-scented winter shrub, *Azara microphylla*, also had to go because our modest cottage doesn't have any proper footings. Don't be too concerned, it's stood for 300 years.)

I mourned both and missed their fragrance, but two years later the winter-flowering clematis crept back and now it's better than ever. It was introduced from Minorca in 1783 and William Robinson, writing in 1912, commended its scent. This year the pendent bells began to appear at Christmas and by the

end of January there were hundreds of greenish white, faintly spotted flowers framed by glossy dark foliage.

The bees love to visit and it cascades down a kitchen window, making washing up far more pleasurable. Hot summers reduce it to a tangle of stems, but the leaves on this phoenix reappear by the end of September. Like all winter and early clematis it's purported to be a no-prune cultivar, although the Best Beloved did a pretty savage job when it had to be trained on a new gripple system of wires. I remember crying when I saw it!

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I like abundance and flow in my garden

The south-facing stone wall of the cottage is too hot for *Clematis montana*, so they straddle the wooden shed in a shadier corner. I do grow the well-behaved 'Van Gogh' (fig. 2), a fairly new montana with very scented, purple-pink, open flowers. It's restrained in its growth habit here, and very flower-packed, with substantial flat-faced flowers that are far more formal than most montanas. It's also a much stronger colour: most are a cool pink. However 'Van Gogh' flowers three weeks earlier than *C. montana* var. *wilsonii*, a cool-white wildling with narrow, slightly twisted tepals. Collected by Wilson in central China in 1900, it's noted for its hot-chocolate scent, although I've never picked it up. It covers the shed, although it took time to get going, but eight years on the twisted mature stems are straight out of Sleeping Beauty.

I also like clematis that can't quite decide whether to climb or loll and I managed to plant 'Edward Prichard' last summer, having grown tired of Princess Kate – her pink-edged, tulip-shaped flowers looked a bit grubby and there weren't quite enough of them. 'Edward Prichard', an Australian clematis raised c. 1950, is like a nest

of spiders, with four or five etiolated pale-mauve petals whirly-gigging round greenish white filaments. This cross between two fragrant herbaceous clematis, *C. recta* and *C. tubulosa*, is highly fragrant. The late Christopher Lloyd of Great Dixter (writing in *Clematis*, published in 1965) said it didn't do much in his border. I'm hoping mine will get to waist height or slightly more. Will it set seed? Probably not, for many hybrids are sterile.

This year, I'm determined to plant an 'Arabella'. There are two. The purple-blue, non-clinging 'Arabella' (fig. 3), raised by Barry Fretwell and launched in 1990, should not be confused with a white double named by Lemoine and Sons in 1887. Fretwell's 'Arabella' seems to be in every clematis lover's Top Five, because it flowers from June until October. 'Arabella' is the most widely grown clematis in the world, and it's an excellent groundcover plant. Barry Fretwell, a Devon-based hybridiser who founded the now defunct Peveril Nursery, recommends planting it with an open shrub rose and I can see this shimmering mid-blue

clematis flowering through the warm-apricot Hybrid Musk, 'Buff Beauty'. Two wildlings together. 🌸



Fig. 2 C. 'Van Gogh'



Fig. 3 C. 'Arabella'

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