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FIRST STEPS WITH A CLEMATIS

If you haven't tried clematis before, or if you have tried and been disappointed in the results, here are some suggestions. Following them should produce a plant with a healthy attitude.

The clematis plants offered in tiny pots or cardboard tubes are infants, and not yet strongly rooted. Usually it is better to grow one of these on for a few months in a 1 or 2 gallon pot than to put it straight into the ground. Young clematis do not object to having their root systems confined for a while, whereas if they are abandoned in a big hole at that tender age they may have trouble getting started. Even if your new clematis is a better rooted specimen in the standard gallon pot, you might consider burying it pot and all in the planting hole, lifting it in the Fall when it has done all it can for the year, removing the pot, and setting the plant back in. This lets the roots develop undisturbed, and also gives you a chance to move the clematis to another site if you've had second thoughts. (A potted clematis may come with the stake fastened to the pot. No matter when you elect to take out the plant, first remove the staple!)

Whenever possible, choose a site with half a day of sun or, if it is mainly open ground, some filtering of the summer sun. Most clematis enjoy sunlight on their tops and a cool, rather moist area for their roots. But many, especially the striped hybrids, fade quickly in strong sun. In fact most clematis can suffer just as people do from prolonged exposure to direct sun in the heat of summer. So in most climates it's prudent to offer them a little shelter, by way of branches high overhead or the foliage of a host plant, such as a relatively open shrub or climbing rose.

Choose a spot where the soil won't be frequently broken up by replanting. Clematis may send out feeder roots quite near the surface. If you want to surround the plant with annuals, it's wise to choose self-seeding ones, or at least avoid tucking them in close to the base. Some gardeners may prefer to use gravel or a bark mulch, and mound it up around the plant (leaving a little airspace just at the base) when the weather turns cold.

Dig a 2 foot cube for the hole. (If there is not that much room, at least break up the surrounding earth somewhat to lessen the chance of water pooling in the hole). Put some coarse material at the bottom to promote drainage. Fill in with soil, amended with peat moss and fine bark or pumice if your soil tends towards clay. Set the plant in so that the crown is buried at least 2" beneath the surface deeper if the site is exposed to sharp winds in winter.

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When all is in place, prune each stem back to a low pair of buds, or, if the plant is already exhibiting flower buds and you can't bear to remove them, let it have its first bloom and THEN cut it far back. This is an important step; it fosters growth and branching.

Give the plant a shrub, tree, trellis, or fence to climb on. The stems must have support unless you want them to sprawl. The bush types (*integrifolia*, etc.) sprawl attractively, but usually look better with some staking if there are no foliage plants close by for them to ramble into.

Keep the ground moist, but don't feed until there are signs of new growth. Then give a low number fertilizer—perhaps 5-10-10 or a rose food, or (if the plant seems to need a quick pick-me-up) a spraying with half-strength Miracle-Gro followed in a few days by the 5_10_10. Easy on the nitrogen: it stimulates top growth, and at the start root growth is more important. Later feeding depends partly on what else is growing nearby, but in general the spring flowering sorts do best if given a booster shot shortly after they finish blooming and are trimmed back if the summer varieties give out temporarily late summer; they can be cut back partway and fed for renewed bloom.