



Clematis "Comtesse Bouchaud" on an old tree stump.

Answers to gardening questions

A place for the Climber

By R. W. Sidwell

Some plants are designed to rely on others for support. This would seem to give them some evolutionary advantage. It enables a plant to reach a height of, say, ten feet, in a few months whereas the tree on which it climbs may have taken many years to do the same. Obviously climbers have a use in the garden.

Climbers may be annuals, such as morning glories, herbaceous perennials such as *Tropaeolum speciosum*, or shrubs such as honeysuckle or clematis. Some are capable of clinging to flat surfaces, others climb by means of tendrils or twining stems and require twiggy supports, and others again just sprawl about. We will take the groups in turn and look at their uses.

First those that cling to flat surfaces. First of these is the ivy, that most accommodating plant, equally at home as ground cover in dense shade. The many variations available in leaf colour and shape make it a uniquely valuable plant that is very much in favour again nowadays after a period of neglect.

The other group of these self-clingers of importance is that of the vines. Some of these, notably *Parthenocissus quinquefolia* and *P. tricuspidata*, are genuine self-clingers but some species require twigs for support. Make sure that you get the right one. Few, if any, plants give such a brilliant display of autumn colour as do these. There are a few other self-clinging shrubs. They mostly require a little encouragement to get started. *Hydrangea petiolaris* is an example of this but it is a climber worth having.

Most of our climbers twine or hang on by tendrils. The clematis do so by means of their petioles, which coil round thin supports, often their own neighbouring shoots or leaf stalks. The toughness of these coiled petioles is remarkable. Clematis has been called the Queen of Climbers. Few plants can equal them for sheer beauty of flower form. The viticellas and many of the species are best left to ramble over large trees. They may, however, be kept in bounds if required by pruning hard in the spring. Early flowering kinds should not be pruned too hard or they will lose much of their bloom.

There are often difficulties in getting clematis established. Some of these problems are related to water supply. Do not plant clematis close to a wall where dry conditions exist. Do

not plant vigorous, water-consuming, plants close around them, in spite of what some of the books say. Once established, with their roots well down into moist soil, clematis will live for many, many years.

The honeysuckles include many scented climbers. Where great vigour is wanted, the more or less evergreen *Lonicera japonica* should be a first choice. This is a more attractive plant, in my opinion, than its rival the Prussian vine (*Polygonum baldschuanicum*) but do not plant either where space is restricted. The early and late Dutch honeysuckles are preferable for such sites.

Most of the vines climb by tendrils on twiggy supports. In addition to some more species of parthenocissus, there are many members of the genus *Vitis* itself. This is the genus of the grape vine. The variety "Brant" does, in fact, bear edible fruit, small though they are, but its real attraction in the garden is the brilliant autumn colour of its foliage.

Two other vines worth having are *V. Coignetioire* with huge leaves and good autumn colour and *Vitis vinifera purpurea*, a purple leaved form of the ordinary grape vine.

The jasmines include climbers and sprawlers, some scented some not. Most useful among the scented species for outdoor planting is *Jasminum officinale*. This is fully hardy, which cannot be said of polyanthum that beautiful species often grown as a pot plant and safe outdoors only in sheltered spots in mild winters. The winter flowering *J. nudiflorum* is not scented but the persistence with which its flowers keep opening during mild winter weather makes it a favourite with many.

A rampant climber for a sunny wall is *Campsis grandiflora*, which has rich orange-coloured trumpet-shaped flowers in abundance in hot summers.

Among the sprawlers, pride of the place must go to the roses. No rose is a true climber but the term rambler perhaps describes their habit best. The range of form, character, perfume and colour is great. From the rampant "Kiftsgate" to the more restrained *Rosa ecae* there is everything that one can wish for, but they require an article (and more) to themselves.

We must here find room to mention a few other sprawlers. The potato

family contains some useful plants. *Solanum crispum* bears its bluish-purple flowers with their characteristic yellow staminal cone over a long period in the late summer. It is at its best when not kept too tidy but just allowed to flop. It can be pruned hard in the spring to prevent too untidy an appearance.

A further group that we might mention are those shrubs which, although quite capable of standing on their own feet, are by custom planted against walls. In some cases (e.g. ceanothus) this is justified because of doubtful hardiness. In others such as pyracantha and the well known "japonica" (*chaenomeles spp*) it is justified because they seem to look right in such a position. In fact they are excellent in open sites without support.