



Just when you get all excited about seeing your prized clematis bloom again, suddenly the vine begins to wither and die. You ask yourself, "How could this be?" It bloomed beautifully in previous years. You've changed nothing about its care. What is causing the problem?

Chances are the culprit is a fairly common fungal disease called *Ascochyta clematidina*, more commonly called clematis wilt. Sometimes fungal problems run in streaks, and this particular problem is one that I'm seeing more than in past years. Why one plant is affected and another isn't remains a mystery. Although I have no absolute answer, I do know that most fungal problems are more prevalent in damp, humid weather such as we've recently experienced. Clematis wilt generally occurs in early summer when the plant is vigorously growing. Wilt seems to infect large, show-stopping, flowering varieties more often. I've read that a few of the smaller flowering clematis cultivars are resistant to this fungus. I'll share the names of a few of those cultivars with you later.



Clematis wilt, sometimes called clematis leaf and stem spot, causes the foliage and stems to dry and wither, often they turn black. One may see reddish lesions along the stems. Interestingly, the onset of this disease is always quick. I've often heard people say, "Yesterday my clematis

looked beautiful, and today it's limp, withered and dying. What's happening?"

As stated earlier, damp humid weather exacerbates the problem. The disease is spread by spores. Some experts believe that the disease enters weakened stems that have been injured or cracked, often simply by the wind. In older plants, the disease usually begins in the woody portion near the ground. The stem dies back because the plant can't move water through its vascular system. If left untreated, the disease can spread throughout and kill the plant.

The good news is, the disease doesn't attack the roots, and the plant may recover. Notice, I said, "May." I read that new shoots can appear up to three years later, so don't be too hasty to dig out the plant.

What can one do? At the first sign of withering, prune out any affected stems, cutting as close to the root as possible. Dispose of the diseased stems. Do not compost. After pruning, keep the roots well watered. Hopefully, new shoots should emerge. If no new top growth occurs, allow the rootstock to overwinter. New growth may still emerge the following spring.

Although a fungicide treatment of sulfur in early spring before the new leaves unfurl may help, cultural care is the best preventive measure for this problem. Clematis does better in areas that receive six or more hours of sun daily. It prefers morning sun.

Planting new clematis deeply is good insurance. Dig the hole deep enough to allow the first two sets of leaves to be completely underground. Fill the hole carefully around the slender, brittle stems. If deeply planted clematis is attacked by wilt, it will usually come back from below the ground. Keep the root system cool by shading with other plants or by using mulch. Clematis is most resistant if grown in humus-rich, well-drained, evenly moist soil. Avoid cultivating the soil around clematis plants.

As mentioned before, clematis wilt seems to affect the larger flowering plants; however, even smaller flowering plants are not exempt. One can choose from several varieties of clematis claimed to be resistant to fungal problems. They include *Clematis montana* (white), *Clematis macropetala* (pale blue), *Clematis alpina* (blue), *Clematis viticella* (purple), and *Clematis tangutica* (yellow).

Lastly, older, healthy, well-established clematis plants seem less likely to be infected with wilt. The challenge is getting them to that stage.