NEW ZEALAND CLEMATIS, *FIVE OF THE BEST*

JOE CARTMAN

Most New Zealand gardeners are familiar with Clematis paniculata, and justifiably so, as it is one of our most widespread and noticeable native climbers. It may come as a surprise however to discover that there are nine native species in these isles. Of these nine species, five are very attractive, garden- worthy climbers. These are *Clematis afoliata, C. foetida, C. forsteri, C. paniculata,* and *C. petriei. C. foetida* and *C. paniculata* are both large climbers that inhabit forest, especially the forest margins. The other three are smaller climbers inhabiting shrubby plant communities especially the grey shrub communities that are a feature of many areas in the eastern South Island mountains. The remaining four species are have a quiet charm. *C. cunninghamii, C. marata,* and *C. quadribracteola* are climbers, while the extraordinary. *C. marmoraria* is a small, non climbing alpine plant, the world's smallest known clematis species.

All New Zealand clematis are dioecious, meaning individual plants are either male or female. Within any given population the males tend to have the larger, more showy flowers. Comments in the text refer to male flowers unless otherwise stated.

As mentioned earlier, *Clematis paniculata* is our best known and most recognised native climber, being familiar and very visible in the wild when in flower. Its pristine white flowers stand out against the darker foliage of the forest canopy. It is also readily available in the nursery trade. The leaves are made up of three dark green, thick, leathery leaflets. The leaflets are entire or with a few small notches or lobes near the tips. Some populations have a dark irregular blotch in the centre of each leaflet. Seedlings exhibit

a wide range of leaf shapes, sizes and markings for the first season or two and they look quite unlike the adult leaves. The flowers can be very big, up to 10cms across. However this does not automatically make the biggest flowered plants the most garden-worthy. This is often a matter of flower power rather than sheer size of flowers. The flowers have six or seven sepals, (clematis do not have petals), some have the added bonus of purple or pink stamens and anthers in the male flowers. The female flowers tend to hang down and they do not open fully. This is probably to protect the stigmas from the weather.

Clematis foetida.

This is another forest species though more often found in the forest margins and in regenerating, cut over forest. The adult foliage is superficially like *C. paniculata* but not as leathery and normally a lighter green. Juvenile foliage is smaller and more dissected, persisting for several years and for as much as 1.5 metres of growth, before gradually changing to the adult phase. Again juvenile plants do not look at all like the adults.

The individual flowers are small, around 2cms across with five to eight creamy yellow sepals, and have a heavy, sweet fragrance. What they lack in size they make up for in numbers. They are produced in huge clusters of hundreds of flowers. This is another very obvious plant when in flower in the spring, the billowing masses of flowers standing out in the canopy.

It is another widespread species found in lowland areas though it is strangely absent from large areas within its range.

One of its strongholds is Banks Peninsula where it can be seen growing conveniently on the roadside by Lake Forsyth and in many other places on the Peninsula.

Clematis forsteri.

This and the next species, *C. petriei,* are similar plants in many respects and the subject of some confusion in the horticultural trade. They are however readily distinguished with close observation when in flower. *C. forsteri* is very variable throughout its range and also within some populations. The leaves vary from three foliate with simple leaflets to highly dissected, sometimes in the same population. They are glossy green and some are very

ornamental foliage plants, especially the very dissected leaf forms.

The flowers can be up to 5cm across. They have six to seven sepals that vary in shape though they mainly tend to be rather long and narrow. They are yellow green in colour, sometimes very pale, but never pure white. There is normally a small maroon stain at the base of the sepal and they are also finely hairy on the inner and outer surfaces. This is an important distinguishing point between *C. forsteri* and *C. petriei*. The seeds are also hairy and hairless in the latter. The flowers normally hang downward rather elegantly though some populations have flowers that open almost flat. An added bonus is a strong spicy scent.

C. forsteri is distributed through much of the North Island, south of Auckland. It is quite a uniform plant in the North Island. However all of that changes in the South Island. It occurs through the northern half of the South Island, where it is anything but uniform, exhibiting an extraordinary array of leaf forms and flowers. Some of these local variants are worth selecting, propagating vegetatively, and naming. This would require growing a number of selections from various localities and picking one or two of the more outstanding ones.

Clematis petriei.

As mentioned earlier this species is similar to *C. forsteri*. In leaf *C. petriei* is difficult to tell apart from forms of *C. forsteri* but *C. petriei* does not have the extremes of leaf dissection which the former exhibits.

The flowers of *C. petriei* are around 4cm across. They have six to seven sepals that are green and finely hairy on the outer surface but hairless on the inner. They also lack any maroon stain at the base of the sepal. The flowers open almost flat and look out horizontally, having a strong, sweet, fruity scent, quite distinct from *C. forsteri*.

C. petriei grows in shrubby areas in the eastern South Island from the Rakaia River in Canterbury to south eastern Marlborough, although it appears to be absent from a sizeable area between these populations. When in flower in the wild it is quite obvious, where its masses of bright green flowers stand out against the sombre colours of the grey shrub communities in which it grows.

Clematis afoliata.

This species is instantly recognisable as it lacks obvious leaves. It is the green leaf blades that are missing and all that remains of the leaf is the stalk with which the plant climbs. It looks much like a tangle of green wire growing among shrubs, or in rocky dry places.

In flower this is a stunning plant; the flowers have four long pale yellow sepals with a maroon stain at the base. They tend to hang downward, only partly open and they have a strong spicy scent. This clematis grows on the eastern side of the country from the southern North Island to South Canterbury, inhabiting dry sunny and exposed places among rocks and scrub.

This is a very elegant plant when in flower and a splendid curiosity for the remainder of the year.

C. afoliata co-habits with *C. petriei* in some places and the two hybridise where they meet.

There are some very attractive plants among the hybrids. Other than these occasional groups of hybrids, there are very few natural wild hybrids among the other New Zealand clematis. Generally the resident species do not flower at the same time and as a consequence avoid cross- pollination.

All the New Zealand species flower in the spring or early summer, depending on the aspect and altitude. The flower buds are formed in the autumn, and are well enough advanced by mid winter in my Christchurch garden to make it obvious that the plants are going to flower.

Flowering occurs in Christchurch gardens through mid September, October and into November, depending on the species and season. *C. paniculata* is earliest to flower, and some forms of *C. forsteri,* the last. There is some variability however from season to season.

This spring flowering means that any pruning that is required should take place just after flowering. This will allow sufficient time for new growth and formation of flower buds for the next spring. Any pruning done in the autumn will remove flower buds that would have produced the following spring display.

In the garden New Zealand clematis have similar demands to exotic species. They like a fertile, well drained soil and especially like cool roots and sunny tops. If the tops are not in the sun the flowering will be much reduced. The plants tend to grow toward the sunny side of their host. *C. paniculata*

and *C. foetida* require a reasonably sized host shrub or tree to climb on. It is worth giving some thought to where the plant has access, as it will climb to the top of its host and into adjacent trees and out of sight, given the chance. *C. forsteri*, *C. petriei* and *C. afoliata* are more restrained climbers, though they will grow to three metres or more. They should be given a place where their scent can be appreciated, such as near a patio where they can be enjoyed on a warm spring day.

Clematis paniculata is widely available in the nursery trade but the others are less often seen. Ask at your local garden centre, and nurseries specializing in our native flora. Members of the New Zealand Alpoine Garden Society have access to fresh seed through the Society's annual Seed List. Contact address is: PO Box 2984, Christchurch 8041

Joe began his horticultural career in England before coming to New Zealand in 1975. He is Supervisor of the Christchurch City Council's container and open ground nurseries. Joe is interested in a wide range of plants, especially the rare and unusual, and has been studying clematis for thirty five years.

photo by Joe Cartman

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Clematis petriei. ***Clematis (page 79)***
photo by Joe Cartman

Clematis paniculata, *Gore Bay. Clematis (page 79)*
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Clematis forsterii, *Awatere. Clematis (page 79)*
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Clematis petriei. ***Clematis (page 79)***
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Clematis afoliata. ***Clematis (page 79)***
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Celebrating the Work of an Incredible Man by Lisa Nelson (page 83)
Lyn and John Nelson in the Italian Garden, Tim Smit at far right.
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