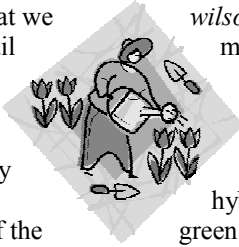


## Cotswold Cottage Gardening: Introducing Gardeners Question Time

Q. "What early flowering climbers can be grown without being wiped out by hard frosts and cold winds? I tried a lovely clematis called 'Early Sensation', it made the first year but then succumbed to cold and damp."

Climbers are one of the most misunderstood sort of plants that we cultivate, mainly because we fail to think about how they grow naturally. In the wild, these plants climb through other shrubs and trees, which not only offer them support, but also protection from the extremes of the weather. When we get them into our gardens, we tend to plaster them against the wall of a building (thus adding drought to the stress of exposure), or over an arch or pergola - often quite flimsy structures, which cause wind-rock at the roots.



out by a sharp frost. White-flowered *var. wilsonii* flowers a fortnight later, so might be a safer bet

The toughest spring-flowering clematis are the atragene group. Although not as showy as the later large-flowered hybrids, they have lovely soft green foliage and dangling bell-like flowers, usually in shades of pink and white. Two cultivars raised in Canada have a good reputation for frost-hardiness: 'Ballet Skirt' is a sharpish mid-pink; 'Rosie O'Grady' is a softer colour, with slightly larger flowers.

### Who Would Flower Early Here?

We also tend to forget that 'early-flowering' plants often come from more favourable climes; they flower in the first few months of the year because in their native environment the weather is warm, and the pollinating insects are up and about! All this means that there are very few true spring-flowering climbers which will withstand frost and, just as fatal, desiccating cold winds.

Amongst clematis, the evergreen *C. armandii* does better in town gardens, where it benefits from the shelter and escaping heat of surrounding houses, but you might get away with it tucked snugly into a corner, where it will get protection from two walls.

Vigorous *C. montana* is happiest growing through a tree, where it will also need less pruning, but even so can be caught

### The Glories of Summer Climbers

I suppose that the ubiquitous winter jasmine (*jasminum nudiflorum*) can be grown as a short climber, if you tie it in, but personally I don't find those starry yellow flowers a good enough excuse for its whippy canes, which attempt to smother every other plant in the vicinity. A nicer shrub to fan out on a wall is *Forsythia suspensa*; this has a laxer, more arching habit than most of its bushy relatives although it is still not a true climber. But personally I would save my climbing spaces for the glories of summer clematis and roses, and take my spring colour from the bulbs which flourish naturally at this season.

### Elaine Hunt

*Do you have any gardening questions? Please send them to the Editor, and Elaine will try to answer them in subsequent issues.*