

Christopher Lloyd

Country Life 29th October

Climber Care

At this time of the year, gardeners are wondering how to bring order out of chaos in respect of climbers, many of them in conspicuous places on house walls and over the porch. The instinct is to tidy up, which means to make things look neat and cared for.

This may achieve the desired object but is often short-sighted in respect of blossom to be enjoyed the following spring. All the spring-flowering clematis, for instance, already have dormant flower buds in the axil of every leaf on every shoot made this year. Such are *Clematis montana*, *C. alpina* and the closely related *C. macropetala*.

Also the evergreen *C. armandii*. Like many evergreens, this is far from looking its best in winter. Its leaves clatter disconsolately in the wind and those you can reach least easily are dead. But it may well have made 10ft-long young shoots during the summer. In every axil of every leaf is a bud containing perhaps half a dozen flower buds, ready to burst forth next March and to fill the air with their almond scent. If you will but wait. By all means prune it as hard as you like the moment flowering is past, and never mind that it has already started making new shoots. It will soon make plenty more. The same applies to the other spring-flowering clematis I have mentioned.

Lonicera japonica Halliana is a different case. This is often recommended as being evergreen, but it looks extremely shabby throughout the winter, affording little if any pleasure from its evergreenery. However, this one flowers principally on the young growth made in the current season and not starting till late June at earliest. So you will be denying yourself little or nothing by pruning it now. With the earlier-flowering climbing honeysuckles you should proceed more circumspectly. Remove the shoots that have flowered heavily this year (their flowering will often have been succeeded by red berries) and leave the long young ones that only flowered at their tips, if at all. If they appear to need some control, tie the principal ones in, loosely, to their support, be it a pole (they are good pole subjects) or a wall.

Jasminum nudiflorum is flowering now, so you are unlikely to set about it prematurely, but that can receive a good clipping over in early spring. We currently, and this happens every autumn, have a rather weird yet beautiful juxtaposition. Before the jasmine has even shed its leaves, it is flowering next to *Abutilon megapotamicum*, a loose-limbed mallow, usually trained to a warm wall and bearing lantern flowers in red, yellow and darkest brown. It flowers on its young wood and often gets better and better through the latter half of summer and into late autumn.

That wants a strict shortening back treatment in the spring.

The other most popular jasmine flowers in summer, white and heavily night-scented. That is *J. officinale*, of which I grow the extra-vigorous form, affine. It can become very large, unruly and space-consuming. However, you do not want to remove its young shoots, which will all be on top of the shrub. Lift up its skirts, so to speak, and cut out the old growth that has flowered and will never do so again. This is a worthwhile job that needs some patience, so I like to leave it till the spring, when there is warmth in the air. Why not be comfortable, while you are about it? You won't be making the shrub look tidy, but you will be preventing it from taking up a lot of unnecessary space, because of its containing mattress-fulls of dead growth.

One never comes to the end of advice on pruning wisterias and of explanations for their not flowering when you feel they should. The only time I want to prune my old wisteria is in the winter. It is one of the last deciduous shrubs to lose its leaves. Only then can you truly appreciate what you are doing. Young shoots that have no great strength, we leave full length. Those ultra-vigorous shoots that wisterias are apt to make all through their long lives, we remove unless they are required for the purpose of covering a new area.

This is *Wisteria sinensis* and it is probably the same clone as was introduced in the early nineteenth century, but has been vegetatively propagated ever since. It has good colouring, wonderful scent and often flowers welcomely, if not abundantly, a second time in July. If you get the July flowering but none in spring, it is undoubtedly because sparrows ate out the swelling buds in earliest spring. We watch out for this trouble and stretch an open network of black cotton over the branches, if trouble is brewing. That stops it.

Seedling wisterias will be cheap but are not to be trusted. They often take many years to start flowering and the chances then are that the colour will be weak and disappointing.

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