

Good breeding shows in his clematis



IRENE
VIRAG

So, there I was at the Philadelphia Flower Show this spring, lost in what seemed like an infinity of exhibits. Then I spotted a patio surrounded by a vine-covered fence and knew I'd found the stars of the show.

The vines were different but all were cultivars of the same flower — clematis. The vine of almost 300 faces — that's how many species of clematis there are — was one of the stars. The other was the slim, handsome, gray-haired man standing by the fence. I knew he had to be a Brit — it was something about the cut of his jacket, the debonair stance, the voice of quiet authority as he discussed the exhibit.

I was looking at horticultural history — the man and his flower. Raymond Evison and clematis. Lots of clematis. Flowering on the fence, climbing up through junipers, fluffing on the ground. Red flowers, white flowers, pink flowers, purple flowers. And some of them his most recent creations. The Raymond Evison Patio Collection, consisting of the first clematis plants ever bred specifically for growing in a pot — and the RHS or Royal Horticultural Society Collection of bold, hardy showstoppers.

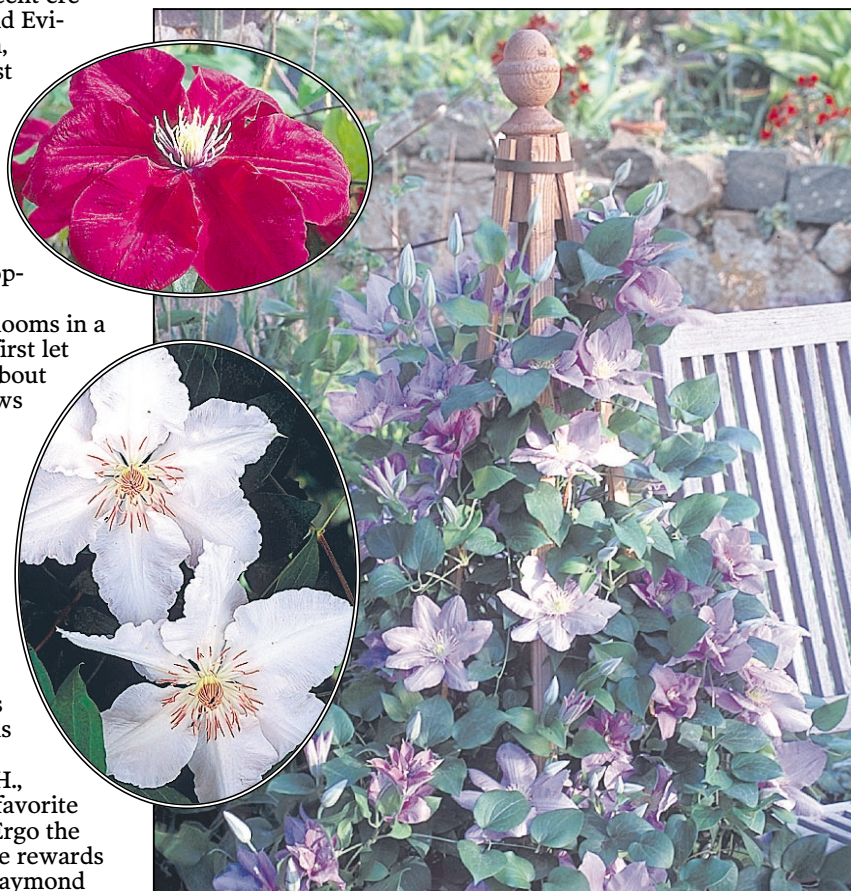
I'll describe the blooms in a minute or two, but first let me tell you a little about Raymond, who knows and loves the vine that made him famous even more than George Foreman knows and loves lean, mean grilling machines.

George Foreman, who is one of my heroes because of his sense of good humor as well as his right cross, only sells his grills. Raymond Evison O.B.E., V.M.H., doesn't just sell his favorite plant, he breeds it. Ergo the initials — the empire rewards its horticulturists. Raymond received the Victoria Medal of Honor from the Royal Horticultural Society and was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II.

And why not? "It takes two-and-a-half thousand controlled crosses to produce a hybrid," Raymond told me while dis-



Horticulturist Raymond Evison, who specializes in clematis, was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II.



Clematis Cezanne, above, Rosemoor, inset top, and Hyde Hall. Blooms often are 6 inches wide.

cussing the blooms in his exhibit at Philadelphia. "That's 20- to 30,000 seeds; 10,000 seedlings, 98 percent of which get thrown away. These plants come out of that program."

Some people write books or run for president or invent light bulbs. Raymond has built his life and career around a flowering vine. A nurseryman's son, he was 16 when he

got the chance to work his first Chelsea Flower Show with an "old gent" named Percy Picton. Percy is legendary among clematis lovers as the creator of the Hagley Hybrid, a pale pink beauty with pointed petals. "When we went for supper, Percy told me stories of selecting and breeding clematis," Raymond was hooked.

Two years later, he was able to name his first clematis hybrid Edith in honor of his mother. Now his 8½-acre operation on the island of Guernsey in the English Channel is the largest wholesale clematis nursery in the world. And he goes adventuring in search of new species.

"My last expedition was in China in 1998. I found 35 species in the wild in three weeks. I love having my boots on and being 13,000 feet up."

He smiled as he looked at the exhibit. "I have 5 million of these clematis growing in Guernsey." He paused. "Clematis has been very good to me," he said.

Five years ago, Raymond and his wife, Sara, who masterminded the exhibit together, bought an old house on a 14-acre property that was once a daffodil farm. "It has a medieval kitchen from 1350, and we have a 72-foot, lean-to greenhouse done in Victorian style. So far, I've identified 50 cultivars of daffodils. I found one clematis in the garden. *Viticella*, from Italy."

Presumably, passersby can expect to see a lot more varieties. Since the garden is Victorian, the Evisons are concentrating on blooms that go back to the 1800s, but don't count out some of Raymond's recent creations. Actually, I got a look at the patio collection last fall when it was displayed at the 2004 Garden Writers Association Symposium. Raymond introduced the collection in partnership with Hines Horticulture of California and it's available now at select nurseries. You can check www.hinesvines.com to find a garden center near you that carries it.

There are three plants in the collection and two of them flower throughout the season. Picardy has 4- to 5-inch-wide blooms that show off from June to September with pinkish-red petals and yellow sepals. "It grows 4 feet, maximum," Raymond said. "It's ideal for patios and town houses." Versailles has similar-sized wine-red flowers, reaches only 2 to 3 feet and blooms from May to September. Cezanne flowers only from early to mid-summer but its violet blooms are 6 to 7 inches wide. At the show, Raymond pointed it out in a pot with annuals growing around it. "Clematis love to have their roots in the shade," he explained.

The bold-colored climbers of the RHS collection — named after the Royal Horticultural Society's four gardens — are heralded as easy to grow and long-blooming, some of them flowering until the first frost. According to Raymond, "they are to vines what shrub roses were to hybrid teas."

Wisley has blue, 4- to 5-inch-wide blooms, reaches up as high as 9½ feet, shows off from June to September and interacts nicely with roses. Wine-red Rosemoor produces 5- to 6-inch flowers, does its thing from May to September, climbs to 9 feet and looks grand on pergolas and archways. Hyde Hall grows to 7½ feet with white flowers that are 5 to 7 inches in diameter. It's only a May-to-June bloomer but can be raised in a container and does well with other wall-trained climbers in small gardens. Harlow Carr is a hairy plant with 4-inch flowers that have dark brown centers and slightly twisted deep purple-blue sepals. Raymond thinks it has "super color."

There's one other thing I should tell you. I've always said cle-MAH-tis. You may say cle-MAT-is. Raymond Evison O.B.E., V.M.H., says KLEM-uh-tis, and that's good enough for me. And it really doesn't matter. As the vine twines, clematis comes in enough varieties to make all of us happy.