



Clematis montana var. *grandiflora*

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C. *montana* var. *grandiflora* is a wonderful montana. I have four plants of that name in very different positions in my south facing garden which is situated at the top of a steep hill with the prevailing south westerlies shooting up from the valley below and the bitter south easterlies whipping up and across the open land to the east.

John Howells, in his book, *Clematis The Montanas*, p.68, states that var. *grandiflora* was ‘Collected by one of Nathaniel Wallich’s collectors at Mount Pundua, Silet Province, India in June 1829.’ He goes on to say that ‘Wallich gave it to the firm of Veitch of Exeter and that the plant first flowered in their nursery in 1844.’

I am a gardener, not a botanist, and am writing about some glorious plants that grace four very different positions in my garden – which houses the only current National Collection of the Montana Group. (I have over two hundred plants of this captivating group, representing fifty eight named varieties and cultivars and many seedlings found in the garden over the last eight years.) There is one var. *grandiflora*, 20040019, (i.e., the nineteenth variety obtained in 2004) to the east of a thick laurel hedge. The hedge is pruned to about 4m (12ft) each summer. Plant 20040019 is, therefore, protected from the worst frosts and fierce south westerly winds. Another specimen, 20040033, drapes itself elegantly along the north boughs of an enormous apple tree about half way down the garden. A third, 20060015, covers a well established hazel tree near the bottom of the garden but is partially sheltered from the prevailing winds by a huge holly tree further down the hill to the south west. All three were planted east of their host tree, but have varying protection from the cold and wind as well as differing amounts of light available to help get them established and bring out their delicate perfume. The fourth var. *grandiflora*, 20020002, is planted in a 1m (3ft) cube bottomless box, which my husband and I found in my late mother-in-law’s garden shed. We used this because the tangled mass of tree roots at the site made it impossible to dig a large enough hole without compromising the lives of the surrounding trees. This is situated to the west of a dead flowering cherry and is fully exposed to the prevailing south west and bitter south east



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winds that howl up from the valley below. I believe its roots will have found their way into the ground by now, nine years after planting. All four plants are partnered with a different pink flowering variety in order of description above, × *vedrariensis* ‘Highdown’, ‘Vera’, *C. montana* ‘Lilacina’ and ‘Elizabeth’. This adds to the length of display and explosion of colour in the garden during late April and May.

All four of my var. *grandiflora* plants are very beautiful. But they are not identical. Two, 20040033 and 20060015, both received labelled 'Sericea Spooneri', have a delicate but definite light fragrance whilst the other two have none that I can detect (despite being in warmer positions in the garden). The two with light fragrance are both multi-stemmed, very vigorous and established quickly, displaying a wonderful show of flowers the first spring after planting. They were donated to the collection by Mike Brown. The other two, both received labelled 'Grandiflora', came from different highly reputable specialist clematis nurseries but took more than three years to reach maturity. They are also less vigorous. Perhaps they came as younger plants? I cannot say. (Certainly I have noticed that some varieties are recognisably more mature when purchased or donated to the collection.) Neither has a detectable fragrance. However, all four plants now give wonderful displays of flowers each year, and all are clearly recognisable as var. *grandiflora*.

So what about the flowers? Well, they are very beautiful! They are the purest white and glisten and shine like stars once they open, slightly later than the pink varieties in my collection. Montana varieties open over quite a long period of about a month, depending on the temperature. The single pink varieties flower first – and most are perfumed, really lifting the spirits - in mid to late spring. Next come the single whites, followed by



***Clematis montana* var. *grandiflora* and 'Elizabeth'**

the semi and double pink then, finally, the semi and double white varieties. At least two months of continuous colour and fragrance. What more could you ask for? Back to the flowers. They open out almost flat and face outwards, almost shouting at you to look at

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them. At 10cm (4in) diameter they are amongst the largest flowers in the collection, the honours being shared with two scented single pink varieties, *C. × vedrariensis* 'Hidcote' and *C.* 'Mayleen'. Howells (op. cit.) describes the flower as 'Four, sometimes five, broad obovate tepals that do not overlap; creamy bud; white flower; yellow anthers; greeny-white filaments; pistil – green and prominent; grouped in clusters of 4-6. My plant has flowers with slight but definite scent. Flower up to 8cm (3¼ in) across. Roy Lancaster (*Travels in China*, 1989) noted plants with flowers up to 12cm (4½ in) across at Huadianba, China. May have tinge of red on back of tepals.' With my varieties being 10cm (4in) diameter they fit the bill. But what this description doesn't mention is the way that the tepals glisten in the sunlight. Just magic!

As for hardiness, accession number 20020002 had no flowers in 2009. They were caught by a late frost that year, but had good growth and display the following year. Dozens of new stems have emerged from the base during the current freezing winter 2010-11. They have been able to withstand temperatures down to -12°C, coupled with gale force winds and torrential rain in exposed positions, north, south, east or west. I think we could describe them as hardy.

In 2010, a century after Florence Nightingale died, I was asked to identify a massive ancient Montana on a huge south facing bay window at Embley Park, the Nightingale family home and estate. The plant had been cut back very severely in autumn 2009 to clear the ground floor windows and allow light back in! However, by late April 2010 it was displaying the largest Montana flowers I have seen. Clearly var. *grandiflora* and its arm-thickness gnarled stems confirming that it could possibly be over a hundred years old. (Pictures drawn in Florence's lifetime indicate it was already in situ.) Could it have been from seed collected by E H Wilson at Huent Omei, China, June 1904 or Western Szechuan, China, in July 1908? These were said to have very large flowers (Howells, op.cit.). I shall be back to measure up and take more cuttings early this summer (I already have one rooted cutting growing in my conservatory), when there should be an even better display with all the new shoots mature. Many of the specimen trees on the huge estate (now a school) are Champion trees of Great Britain and Ireland. Clearly a previous owner must have had a passion for collecting and growing exciting plants at least a century ago.

Writing this in February 2011, I am unable to compare the leaves of my four specimens. I can't believe I haven't already done this, but have pencilled a reminder to myself to study these carefully once they unfurl next month. There are already big buds in many leaf axils so it won't be long. Perhaps I will be able to add pictures and measurements to this posting?

With grateful thanks to my proof readers, Brian Collingwood, Vicki Matthews & Dr Mary Toomey, without whom I would not have been able to submit a botanically sound script. Layout B. Collingwood.

