

adapted from **One Magical Bloom**

by Jennifer Lanthier  
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- 1 My blue clematis<sup>1</sup> bloomed this year. Hardly a news bulletin, I know. I began the day telling friends and relatives in great excitement; then, as they failed to respond in kind, my tone became quieter and my approach off-hand. Eventually, I stopped telling people.
- 2 Gardening is taking a bashing these days—too much of a yuppie pastime, perhaps, or worse, too identified with excess, with those wealthy enough to hire others to do the dirty work for them. Whatever the cause, you know it’s out of control, unhip, way uncool, when *Chatelaine* magazine puts out a special gardening supplement. Or when your neighbour, frustrated from digging out garden beds, takes to saying each weekend: “I’m off to the garden centre, to punch somebody.”
- 3 But the blooming of my clematis is a magical thing. Purchased four years ago (back when a slugfest in the garden centre had an entirely different meaning), it was my first real attempt at gardening, beyond impatiens and pansies. I proudly bore it home and left it for perhaps three minutes, under the indifferent eye of my non-gardening spouse and the disdainful gaze of the cat. When I returned with transplanting tools, I found my husband in paroxysms of giggles, the bare root of the clematis neatly severed from its impressive, two-foot growth of vine. The cat, his new collar and leash a bold experiment, had a mouthful of elegant green tendrils. I planted the root anyway. The cat was banished indoors.
- 4 Years passed and the gardens, front and back, became awash with fashionable perennials<sup>2</sup>: poppies, periwinkle, peonies, bergamot, bleeding heart, monkshood, delphinium, sea lavender, bell flower, flax and phlox. Neighbours to the east and west took to gardening, too, and beds of vegetables, annuals<sup>3</sup> and perennials found a place beside shrubbery and garden sheds. But still the clematis refused to bloom. Yet it did not die; each year it pushed new, leafy growth along the lattice. But the deep blue petals so longed for did not appear.
- 5 A single clematis is no big deal, friends with gardens said. Just because some plants thrive doesn’t mean all will—maybe your soil is too acid, too clay, too dry, too alkaline. Perhaps you need more sun or less, a more sheltered corner, less competition from other plants. Some clematis need to be cut back, others left alone—which kind did you plant, they wondered. But the label and instructions had been lost in the maelstrom of the cat attack. I had no idea what I was dealing with.
- 6 Somehow, coaxing a bloom—just one—from this stubborn plant became the only thing barring me from enjoying my garden. And my garden had assumed a

significance in my life that is hard to convey. You might assume it's just a generational thing: an impulse over which I had no control.

- 7 In truth, my garden is a link to my family.
- 8 I can see my mother skeptically raising her eyebrows, too aware of my coming of age in a time of annuals. But during a childhood that seemed to be spent moving around from one small Ontario town to another, I found my mother's garden a touchstone, a proof of home.
- 9 Whenever our family moved, we could look forward to the brave red of her salvia, the velvety faces of her pansies and the welcoming scent of marigolds and alyssum. When we lived in Northern Ontario, we waited eagerly for Christmas and my grandfather's gift of amaryllis bulbs to grow indoors, the instructions followed precisely, the growth monitored obsessively, until at last the showy blossom brought a winter garden to our snowbound house.
- 10 My grandfather, my father's father, was the acknowledged head of gardening in the family. His Montreal garden enchanted passersby, who caught their breath at the variety of roses he cultivated year after year. His wardrobe was permanently mired in the 1940s (while my grandmother's, oddly, was stuck in the 1960s), and their dilapidated three-storey Victorian house went far too many years in need of basic repairs. The two things most important to them, however, were always in abundant supply: inside the house, books; outside the house, plants.
- 11 My grandfather was a perfectionist, whether pruning roses, ruthlessly uprooting a rare mistake of a laburnum, or letting the raspberry canes achieve just the right tangledness in the wild corner of the garden. He grew everything in his garden, it seemed, from the vivid scarlet of bergamot to the deep, deep blue of clematis, on a trellis near his shed. But the roses were his pride. He worked his way steadily through their beds, explaining his actions with gentle clarity, then barking out related quotations from Shakespeare's sonnets, or Latin phrases, daring you to admit, at the age of 10, that you did not recognize or understand.
- 12 I bought my clematis when he died. Not a rose. How can I explain this? It would have seemed presumptuous.
- 13 My grandmother—the woman my grandfather called his Irish rose, the most beautiful flower in his garden—died the following year. She was a very determined woman. It was her wish that she not endure another cold Montreal winter without him, another summer of dying roses.
- 14 Last year, my clematis bloomed: one single, spectacular, deep-blue flower. It opened on the morning my first child, my daughter, was born. Pausing in front of the verandah, reluctant to leave for the hospital, I pointed it out to my husband. He refused to be distracted from the two minutes remaining between contractions.

- 15 But later that morning, we gave our daughter my grandmother's name.
- 16 This year, as spring unfolded, I watched the clematis curiously. Would it? Wouldn't it? On the morning of my daughter's first birthday, and not a day before, a half-dozen brilliant blue flowers unfurled their petals.
- 17 Next year, perhaps, I'll plant a rose.

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1 clematis: *a flowering vine*

2 perennials: *plants that grow back every year*

3 annuals: *plants that last for one season only*