

## The Wildflower Garden: *Clematis baldwinii*

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*Clematis baldwinii* (Ranunculaceae) is a showy herbaceous perennial endemic to peninsular Florida, which has been overlooked by the gardeners. Its identifying characteristics, ornamental features, horticulture, and propagation are discussed, including a detailed description of a seed pretreatment to speed germination.

KEYWORDS: *Clematis*, Ranunculaceae, endemic, Florida, germination, native plant, seed pretreatment, wildflower.

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*Clematis baldwinii* is an attractive, easily grown, and frequently encountered perennial wildflower native to central and southern Florida. The exquisite, pendent flowers are borne well above the plant on a long, leafless stalk (technically referred to as a peduncle) and can appear at any time of the year; however, flowers occur most frequently whenever there has been a period of mild, rainy weather, especially in the spring and autumn. The dainty flowers vary from palest lavender to a dusky rose-purple and are followed by a showy cluster of about 2 to 3 dozen seedlike fruits, each of which is provided with a long silky tail that aids in dispersal by the wind. These clusters of silky-tailed fruits are attractive in and of themselves and acquire a golden luminescent appearance when backlit by the sun.

All other clematis species occurring in Florida are straggling vines that climb by way of their twining leaf stalks (petioles). *Clematis baldwinii* is unique among Florida clematis in its more or less erect growth habit. In this respect, it more closely resembles ordinary perennial wildflowers than it does other Florida species of *Clematis*. It is further distinguished by its flowers, which are held well above the plant. In fact, this trait not only distinguishes it from other Florida species of *Clematis*, it is a singular trait that distinguishes it from all other species of *Clematis* in the United States.

Cultivation presents no problems so long as the plants are provided with evenly moist but well-drained soil in full sun or very light shade. Although often found growing in what appear to be rather poor sandy soils in the wild, the plants are at their best in garden settings when provided with

rich soils high in organic matter. If subjected to extended periods of hot, dry conditions, the plants will go dormant. Fortunately, they resprout readily once conditions are more to their liking. Seedlings are greatly relished by snails although I have yet to see a mature plant afflicted with pests of any kind.

*Clematis baldwinii* may be propagated from cuttings and information on the vegetative propagation of *Clematis* is readily available both in books and on the Internet. Information on growing it from seed is harder to come by, which is a shame since it is best propagated from seed. Although *Clematis* seed can take as long as two years to germinate, *Clematis baldwinii* seed tends to germinate much sooner, especially when the following treatment is used.

First, the "tails" should be cut off from each single-seeded fruit. Then the seedlike fruits are soaked in a cup of water for about 4 days. During this period, it is important that bacteria and fungi not be allowed to cloud the water and the water should be changed frequently. The fruits are then sowed normally in a pot filled with a good potting mix. The soil in the pot should be kept moist and under cool, but not freezing, temperatures.

Maximum germination occurs during cool weather. If seed sowing begins too late in the spring, the seeds may lay dormant all summer. Under my conditions in southern Florida, seeds are sown in the heart of winter (December or January) and usually germinates at rates of about 80 percent within 30-60 days. As mentioned above, the young, tender little plants are a favorite treat for snails and a single large snail can devour several dozen seedlings in one night. Once the plants reach a few inches in height, they are much more resistant to snails and can be planted in the ground. The young

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**Figure 1.** The pendent flowers of pine-hyacinth, *Clematis baldwinii*, are borne on stiff stalks well above the foliage. They range in color from pale pink to a dusky rose-purple. The form pictured above bears attractive frosty-pink flowers and appeared spontaneously from self-sown seed in the author's garden.

plants should never be allowed to dry out and, if provided with good growing conditions, the majority will begin to flower within 8 to 12 months.

In spite of being easily grown, free from pests, possessing beautiful flowers, and bearing interesting fruits, *Clematis baldwinii* is extremely rare in commerce and is hard to come by at native plant nurseries. The principal reason is that this is a plant

that is usually unattractive when grown in a pot. Like many native wildflowers, *Clematis baldwinii* invests much time and energy developing a strong root system. Thus, young plants remain small for a long time and nothing much seems to happen above ground. Additionally, the brittle stems tend to snap so that often, most, if not all, of the stems in the pot are lying flat rather than erect. Such plants are perfectly healthy and, when planted in the ground, acquire a more natural and attractive growth habit. Unfortunately, even sophisticated native plant gardeners will pass up the chance to purchase this species because of the expectation that the plants should look perfect. This is regretful and I, for one, never miss an opportunity to purchase *Clematis baldwinii* since I never know when another opportunity to purchase the plant will present itself.

*Clematis baldwinii* is best used in large groups in the garden and it should be kept away from larger and taller plants, which can easily overshadow its subtle charms. The strong, sturdy root system gives it much resiliency in garden settings as well as the ability to temporarily tolerate adverse conditions. Its main weakness as a garden plant is that, within a year or two, it can become an unkempt mass of old stems and, for best appearance, it should be periodically cut to the ground and the old stems removed.

The bell-like, pendent flowers of *Clematis baldwinii* vaguely resemble larger versions of the pendent, bell-like flowers of hyacinths and has led to the common name, *pine-hyacinth*. Of course, *Clematis baldwinii* is not at all related to the true garden hyacinth, *Hyacinthus orientalis*, a bulbous plant with sweetly scented flowers native to the eastern Mediterranean, parts of the Middle East, and Turkey.

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