CLEMATIS BRACHIAATA X CLEMATOPSIS SCABIOSIFOLIA
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It was that classic of botanical literature, *Wild Flowers of the Transvaal* by Cythna Letty, published in 1963 and never reprinted, there is a charming illustration of *Clematopsis scabiosifolia*. Also illustrated in the same book is a specimen of *Clematis brachiata* (traveller’s joy), a near relative of *Clematopsis*. Mention is made of the occurrence of natural hybrids of both species, particularly around Johannesburg where they both occur naturally. I can quite believe this, although in all the years I lived in Johannesburg I never ever saw such a hybrid. However I always felt it would be a worth-while subject to grow in the garden if plants could be obtained.

**Clematopsis scabiosifolia**

*Clematopsis* is an attractive herbaceous perennial about 1 m tall with furry, divided foliage. The sweetly scented, lilac, nodding flowers are borne from mid-summer onwards. In appearance the flowers are very similar to those of *Hellobore*. In its native habitat it is a tough plant growing in the acid, gravelly, nutrient-poor soils of the Witwatersrand and it is able to withstand frosty winters, periodic droughts and the grass fires that sweep over this area nearly every winter. Like so many plants that grow in these impoverished soils, it is not so easy to establish in cultivation. It will grow successfully in a sunny, well-drained corner, providing it is left alone. Any mention of compost or fertilizer and it withers and promptly dies. I have grown it in Cape Town and it survived two winters before an excessively wet spell caused it to rot and die.

**Clematis brachiata**

*Clematis brachiata* is a very different plant and it grows with gay abandon whatever you do to it! I have seen it growing in *Brachystegia* woodland north of Lusaka and in the Little Karoo near Oudtshoorn in the southern Cape. It is adaptable and not fussy about soil type or pH, is found at varying altitudes from almost sea-level on the Natal South Coast to well over 2 000 m in the Natal Drakensberg, and grows in any climate from Mediterranean winter rainfall to subtropical summer rainfall.

It is a very decorative plant and worthy of cultivation: a ideal plant for a ‘wild garden’. The clusters of white, sweet-smelling flowers are borne in late summer, followed by decorative, fluffy seed heads which persist on the plant until well after mid-winter. For a short while in spring the plant is a little untidy and may be the reason it is not more widely cultivated in South Africa. Strangely, both *Clematis* and *Clematopsis* are much in demand in Europe.

**The crossing**

*Clematis* and *Clematopsis* flower at the same time of the year and at one stage I had them growing side by side in the nursery at Kirstenbosch. Feeling meddlesome, I crossed the two species by hand, marked and isolated the flower heads and waited for seeds. In six weeks or so I was rewarded with ripe seeds on the *Clematis brachiata* which I selected as the ‘seed parent’ as it was the more vigorous of the two. The following spring the seed was duly sown, germination was prompt and the plants grew well.

They were planted out and flowered in their second and third years (see illustration on title page).

From the outset it was obvious that the seedlings were hybrids. They had the vigour and speed of *Clematis brachiata* combined with the foliage and compactness of *Clematopsis*. The hybrid plants have a tendency to scramble, but only somewhat reluctantly and never very far. The flowers are slightly smaller (2.5 cm) than those of *Clematopsis*, but have the lilac colour and nodding habit of the plant. The *Clematias* parentage showed in the multiple flower heads (as opposed to single heads in *Clematopsis*) and the floriferousness of the plant.

All in all, the hybrid of the two species combined the attributes of both parents. There is still room for selection and improvement by back-crossing onto *Clematopsis* and I look forward to seeing this elegant and charming plant in the gardens of our more skilled and appreciative gardeners in the future.

For further information on how to obtain seeds of this intriguing plant, contact the author at Silverhill Seeds, tel: (021) 762 4245 or fax: (021) 797 6809.