

The Hellebores

by RICHARD E. WEAVER, JR.

Helleborus is a genus of the Crowfoot Family (Ranunculaceae) including about twenty species native to southern Europe and western Asia. Several species, particularly *H. orientalis*, the Lenten Rose, have been cultivated as medicinal plants since classical times, and they are still important plants in modern gardens because of their beautiful, often oddly colored flowers which appear in winter or early spring, and their bold, handsome foliage.

Like many members of the Crowfoot Family, the showy parts of the flowers of the hellebores are sepals rather than petals. These are generally five in number, and they vary in color from green or white through pink to deep red-purple. The petals are reduced to a ring of nectaries which are mostly obscured by the very numerous and conspicuous bright yellow stamens. The flowers often remain fresh and functional for nearly a month, but they remain on the plants for a much longer period, the sepals persisting and gradually turning green or purplish as the fruit matures.

Perhaps a dozen species and their various hybrids are cultivated in Europe, but only the following are generally available from American nurseries.

Helleborus niger. Christmas Rose

This is certainly the best known and most frequently cultivated species at present, and it is, in my opinion, one of the finest herbaceous plants of any sort that can be grown in New England. As the common name implies, the flowers are similar at a glance to those of a single rose, but unfortunately they are not fragrant. In England or their native southern Europe, the plants may bloom soon after Christmas. But in my garden the flowers have not appeared before early March, even though the buds, large and plump and perfectly formed, may be found just at ground level at the very onset of winter. When they do appear, the 2-3-inch flowers, pure white or with a tinge of pink, rising on short stalks above the magnificent, leathery, almost palmlike foliage, seem almost unreal in a world barely past the dead of winter.

Several varieties and cultivars are available in the trade. Those with particularly large flowers include var. *altifolius* and 'Potters Wheel'. The var. *macranthus*, often listed as a separate species, has

gray-green foliage and the flowering stems are seldom more than 8 inches tall.

Although I can never quite bring myself to cut one, the flowers of the Christmas Rose reportedly last very well when they are brought into the home, at least if the stalk is slit at the base. Outdoors they can usually take the worst March has to offer, but the often recommended practice of protecting them with a basket will, at least, prevent them from being hidden for even a few days by that inevitable snowstorm.

***Helleborus orientalis*. Lenten Rose**

The Lenten Rose is native to Greece and Asia Minor, but it and its hybrids appear to be quite hardy in the Boston area. It is more likely to live up to its common name than the Christmas Rose, and normally blooms here with the early daffodils in April or early May. It is similar in aspect to *Helleborus niger*, but the leaves are larger (often a foot or more across), glossier, with finer and more numerous regularly spaced teeth. In addition, the flowering stalks are frequent-



Left: *Helleborus corsicus* (as *H. lividus*), from *Botanical Register*, vol. 24, plate 54, 1838.

Right: *Helleborus orientalis*, from *Botanical Register*, vol. 28, plate 34, 1842.



Helleborus niger var. *macranthus*, a Christmas Rose. Photo: R. Weaver.

ly branched and bear conspicuous leaflike bracts. The flowers are creamy to brownish in the wild plant, but this is rarely seen in cultivation now. Most plants presently passing as Lenten Roses are actually hybrids with *H. orientalis* as one of the parents. Flowers range in color from apple green through pink to maroon. The so-called Millet Hybrids bear flowers that are frequently streaked reddish inside, suggesting the presence of the Caucasian *H. guttatus* in their ancestry.

Although they are fine garden plants with beautifully colored flowers, the Lenten Roses are not so refined as the Christmas Rose and must be sited carefully. They are rather large and informal, and they look best planted among evergreen shrubs. The large leaves, while remaining evergreen, are generally flattened to the ground with the first snowfall, and even a single-crowned plant may then be almost a yard across.



Helleborus foetidus, showing the habit of the plant, from H. Baillon, *Histoire des plantes*, vol. 1, 1867.

Helleborus corsicus (*H. lividus* subsp. *corsicus*)

This and the following species differ from the first two in that the flowers are borne at the tips of leafy stems rather than arising directly from the crown on naked scapes. Well-grown plants must be impressive and attractive, with their 12-15-inch stems bearing trifoliate, sharply toothed and heavily veined leaves and crowned with a branched cluster of ten to twenty green flowers. But I have not

found *H. corsicus* satisfactory in my garden. Being a native of Corsica, it is not surprising that this species is a bit tender. I have had a plant survive the past two winters, but spring has found the stems weak and flattened and the flower buds mostly blasted. In areas without heavy winter snowfall, this is no doubt a very fine plant. Even here it might be satisfactory if it were protected with an overturned basket.

***Helleborus foetidus*. Stinking Hellebore**

I have not grown this plant, but since it ranges into western Europe it should be one of the hardiest of the hellebores. It is rare in cultivation in this country, and at present I know of only one source — Lamb Nurseries in Spokane, Washington, which is, in addition, the only nursery that lists all the other three species discussed here. *Helleborus foetidus* is similar in aspect to the preceding species but the leaves are more finely divided and the green flowers are often rimmed with purple. As the Latin name implies, the flowers have an unpleasant odor; they appear in April and May. I suspect that *H. foetidus* also needs protection from the weight of the snow in winter.

Hellebores will not prosper unless they are planted in a good, deep soil that never dries out. Deciduous shade, or the shade of a house at midday is ideal. A few applications of a water soluble fertilizer during active growth in the spring are beneficial, and for best results the soil should be near neutral or slightly alkaline. These plants have a reputation for being difficult to transplant, some accounts stating that they will not flower for several years after being moved. If reasonable care is taken, and the long, thick roots are not seriously damaged, this reputation is unfounded. And of course, young plants move better than do mature ones. However, hellebores are highly susceptible to crown rot, so if they are to travel through the mail I would recommend ordering in the spring from a small specialty nursery. Plants from such an establishment will probably be young and either pot-grown or freshly dug.

Most hellebores are long lived and slow in increasing, so they seldom need division except for propagation purposes. Division can be done most anytime with proper care, and this is recommended over seed propagation because the seeds are often slow to germinate and the resulting plants usually take at least four or five years to flower.

Although all parts of these plants are probably poisonous, they should not be a problem in the home garden because there is little about them that would attract children.



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