

Hellebores: Fact and Folklore

By Kristie Jacoby
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A magical plant

The welcome sight of blooms in late winter and early spring have made the hellebore a popular choice for ornamental planting in a four-season garden. They are perennial, deer and pest-resistant, and have attractive evergreen foliage. A member of the Ranunculaceae (buttercup) family, the genus *Helleborus* includes more than 20 species, originating in Europe and Asia. They are easily hybridized, with new varieties being regularly developed.

The flowers have five petal-like sepals that do not fall, but remain on the plant well past the blooming period, gradually turning green. Four species of hellebore have leaves on their flowering stems. The others have basal leaves. All form tight clumps of many growing points that expand via rhizomatous roots. The sepals are showy, and come in a wide variety of colors: small, pale green edged in maroon, red-flushed, golden yellow, showy white or pink, dark purple (called black), or even double-colored selections. Hellebores can be propagated from seed or purchased at a local nursery. Selecting a plant in bloom will allow the preferred choice of flower color.

The species *H. niger*, commonly called Christmas rose, is popular in cottage gardens. It is named for its large white flowers that appear around Christmas time, but is not related to members of the rose (Rosaceae) family. Blooms turn pinkish with age, and the lustrous dark-green foliage rises from the soil to about one-foot tall to one-foot wide. This species needs more shade, regular water and alkaline soil.

H. orientalis, or Lenten rose, blooms in early spring. It is more tolerant of warm-winter climates and is easier to transplant than other species. Flower color includes white, pink, purple and green, often spotted with dark purple. It easily hybridizes, and all varieties are attractive.

H. foetidus, or “bear’s foot” hellebore, blooms from early winter to spring and is more sun tolerant. Flowers bloom in pale green clusters of inch-wide drooping bells. It is only slightly smelly when crushed.

H. argutifolius (*H. corsicus*), hails from Corsica and Sardinia. It is taller (two to three feet) and more sun tolerant than other varieties. Its toothy, six- to nine-inch leaves divide into three leaflets, and flowers are two-inch pale green clusters blooming from winter into spring.

Hellebores should be planted in well-drained soil with plenty of organic matter. They prefer soil that is slightly alkaline, but will grow in neutral to slightly acidic soil (except *H. niger*, which must have alkaline soil). Most prefer shade or partial shade, but some varieties will tolerate sun.



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Do not attempt to re-site or divide them once they are established. They resent being moved! Some types may self-sow, and the seedlings can be transplanted but may not produce the same features as the parent plant. They do well under high-branched trees and in areas protected from strong winds. Hellebores can be susceptible to the fungus botrytis, so leaves with black spots should be cut off at ground level in early winter to prevent spreading the fungus to emerging new growth. Do not compost the affected leaves; place them in the trash bin.

The hellebore has a long and interesting history, hinted at by its name derived from the Greek name for *H. orientalis*, helleboros, meaning “to injure” and “food.” Most species are poisonous. Early folk medicine recognized two types of hellebore: black hellebore (various species of *Helleborus*) and white hellebore, which is *Veratrum viride*, a mistakenly-named and highly toxic member of the Melanthiaceae family. The roots of Helleborus are strongly emetic, inducing vomiting, and potentially fatal.

The root of *H. niger* contains glycosides, which can cause cardiac problems. The plant contains a toxin common to all members of the buttercup family, protanemonin, produced when the plant is wounded or crushed, causing side effects from skin irritation and blistering to poisoning if ingested. It was used for its emetic property to rid the body of worms, with limited success and frequently grave results. Gardeners today would be well advised to wear gloves when handling these plants to avoid skin irritation, and to be aware of toxic effects.

Tales involving *Helleborus* are found throughout history. Dioscorides, the ancient Greek pharmacologist and botanist, recorded the story of a goatherd using black hellebore to purge King Proteus' daughters, thus curing them of madness. Pliny the Elder claimed that if an eagle saw you digging up a hellebore, he would cause your death. He added that it was best to draw a circle around the plant, face east and offer a prayer before digging. The remedy was not to be used on cloudy days.



Blooms in late winter and early spring have made the hellebore a popular choice for ornamental planting in a four-season garden. Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardener.

Finally, a very interesting and possibly useful story comes from Mrs. Maude Grieve, a 20th century English herbalist. Powdered hellebore could reportedly be scattered in the air or spread on the ground and walked upon to render invisibility. Perhaps it could hide an enterprising gardener from the view of a circling eagle while he or she transplants a hellebore seedling.

RESOURCES:

- *Sunset Western Garden Book, Revised and Updated Edition*. Kathleen Norris Brenzel, editor.
- *Plants of the Pacific Northwest Coast*. J. Pojar and A. MacKinnon. Revised 2004.
- *Nursing Herbal Medicine Handbook*. Springhouse Publishing. 2001.
- <http://hortsense.cahnrs.wsu.edu>, 2016.
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- *De Materia Medica, Pedacius Dioscorides*. English translation, 1655.
- *A Modern Herbal*. Mrs. M. Grieve. 1931.