

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Did you know that you could have buttercups blooming in January? Well almost, anyway. Once you have discovered hellebores, a member of the buttercup family, you will want to include some in your winter garden. Fortunately there are many species to be had and hybridizers are busy developing new varieties each year.

The hellebore is a small evergreen perennial that blooms during the winter months and into spring. The clumps expand slowly by rhizomatous roots, but are never invasive. The long-stemmed leaves are divided into leaflets in a palmate pattern. They surround the waxy flowers, which are born singly or in clusters on fleshy upright stems usually about 15 to 18 inches tall. The five showy sepals come in a wide range of muted colors; white, cream, pink, purple to green and some are spotted. They have a center of delicate yellow stamen.

Hellebores tolerate a range of moist, humus rich, fertile, soils, but have varying cultivation requirements. Most benefit from organic matter incorporated in the soil at planting time and an annual mulching in the autumn. They require a well-drained location and protection from strong, cold winds. Some do best in shaded areas and a few enjoy a sunny location. Hellebores have few problems, but in our climate are subject to botrytis, a fungal disease. If dark spots appear on the leaves in December or January cut the leaves off at ground level to prevent infection on the flowers.

Among the best known species of this interesting plant is the “Christmas rose”, Heleborus niger. It is an early bloomer, as early as November in some areas, and has large white flowers sometimes flushed with pink. The Christmas rose requires rich soil and adequate water during dry spells. H. foetidus is another early bloomer. It has attractive, long-fingered leaves of deep green with a hint of a silver sheen. The leaves and flowers share a stalk. The buds hang their heads and slowly open into bells of pale green. They may be rimmed with red or have a reddish tint to the stems. This species needs little or no dry season watering and naturalizes well with daffodils. It will even self-seed after it is established.

Creamier, larger flowers are found on the Corsican hellebore, H. argutifolius. It is taller than most hellebores. Leafy stems grow to 3 or 4 feet. The three-fingered leaves of this plant are courser and have sharp-toothed edges. Flowers appear in March and April. It tolerates less water and more sun than other varieties.

Another familiar hellebore is one known as the “Lenten Rose”, H. orientalis. It is similar in growth habit to H. niger, but is easier to maintain. It blooms in March and May. The flowers may be white, greenish, purplish or rose, often spotted or splashed with deep purple. The edges of the leaflets have many small teeth, whereas the Christmas rose leaflets have fewer and larger teeth.

There are so many fabulous hybrids being developed today, it will be hard to choose. Plant nurseries should soon have specimen on display and you may want to visit one of the many public gardens in our area to see this unusual plant in a natural setting.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.
