

Hellebores

By Gloria Williams
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A treat for your winter garden

Are you looking for a plant that will grow in a shaded area, needs very little care, has few problems, blooms when most other garden plants are still asleep and is absolutely deer proof? The hellebore is a good choice to fill all those criteria. Once you discover this member of the Ranunculaceae, or buttercup family, you will want to include it 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, usually starting as early as late January. The clumps expand slowly by rhizomatous roots but are not invasive. Its leaves are divided into leaflets in a palmate pattern. They surround waxy flowers, which are borne singly or in clusters on fleshy, upright 15 to 18 inch stems. The five showy sepals come in a wide range of muted colors: white, cream, pink, purple to green and some a spotted or etched—with centers of delicate yellow stamens.

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 prefer slightly alkaline soil but will do fairly well in neutral or slightly acid soil. The one exception is *Helleborus niger*, or Christmas rose. It is truly fussy about needing alkaline conditions. A well-drained location and protection from strong, cold wind is ideal.



Most hellebores do best in shaded areas; a few enjoy a sunny location. They have few problems, but in our climate they can be subject to botrytis, a fungal disease. If dark spots appear on last year's leaves, cut them off at ground level in December or January to prevent infecting the emerging flowers. Once established in a good area, hellebores do not want to be divided or moved. They may take several years to reestablish and may not survive the disturbance.

Among the best known species of this interesting plant is the Christmas rose, *H. niger*. It is an early bloomer, as early as November in some areas, and has large white flowers, occasionally flushed with pink. The Christmas rose requires rich soil and adequate water during dry spells.

H. foetidus, the “stinking hellebore” really does not deserve that name, as the smell is really not that bad. The crushed leaves are only slightly skunky smelling. It is also known as “bear’s foot” hellebore. It is an early bloomer and is one of the genera that enjoys a sunny location. It has attractive, long-fingered leaves of deep green with a hint of silver sheen. The leaves and flower 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, coarser and has sharp-toothed edges on its leaves. Flowers appear in March and April. It also tolerates less water and more sun than other varieties. Another familiar hellebore is one known as the Lenten rose, *H. x hybridus* or *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, purple or rose, often spotted or splashed with deep purple. The edges of the leaflets have small serrated teeth, whereas the Christmas rose leaflets have fewer and larger teeth.

There are so many fabulous choices with hybrids being developed today. The blooms come in a wide range of colors including yellow, blue and green as well as combinations of colors. Their shapes and sizes vary from round cup-shaped, star-shaped, to double forms. Hellebores are easily propagated by seed, and there are several websites online that sell the seed. You can grow your own hybrids if you wish, or if not, visit a local nursery where varieties will soon be on display. Visit one of the many public gardens in our area in late winter where you can see this unusual plant in natural settings.



RESOURCES:

- *Hellebores Have it All*. Ann MaCoy. Penn State Cooperative Extension, Jan. 17, 2010. www.cumberlink.com/articles/2010/01/23/lifestyle/home/doc4b5777c356fd6338335772.txt
- *Heavenly Hellebores*. Myrna Ougland. Northwest Garden News, Feb. 1997
- *Sunset Western Garden Book*
- *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Gardening*, American Horticultural Society
- <https://www.chicagobotanic.org/plantinfo/hellebores>

Note: a hyperlink in this article has been updated since its initial publication.