

A Winter Gem in the Garden – Hellebores

Looking for something to liven up that dull winter garden? Hellebores, also known as Lenten Rose, brighten up any garden. They are durable plants that have large leathery, dark green and slightly glossy leaves divided into usually seven to nine segments whose margins are toothed. The leaves are borne at the end of stalks that grow about 12 to 16 inches high. The bloom can't be ignored. The colors range in one direction from white through ivory, cream, primrose, lemon, and chartreuse to a vivid parrot green. In the other direction, the white leads to palest pink, medium pink, rose, ruby, garnet, oxblood, amethyst, dusky purple, slate and finally near black. Blooms are



Helleborus augustifolius

Definitions

SEPAL

a modified leaf which is part of a calyx

CALYX

the usually green outer whorl of a flower consisting of sepals

NECTARY

plant gland that secretes nectar

STAMEN

the pollen-producing male organ of a flower that consists of an anther and a filament

ANTHER

part of the stamen that is usually borne on a stalk

FILAMENT

the anther bearing stalk of a stamen

generally two to three inches across, with the showy part consisting of five rounded overlapping sepals surrounding a cluster of small green nectaries and a lot of pale yellow stamens. The flower looks shapely and may remind you of a single small peony, which is no coincidence since both belong to the Ranunculaceae (buttercup) family. You can count on blooms to remain attractive for eight weeks or more. Their bloom period – December through March here in the Northwest – varies with climate.

Hellebores' native ground stretches south and eastward from the Balkans into Greece and northern Turkey. They perform best in conditions that their wild ancestors prefer: full to partial shade from deciduous trees and well-drained, humusy soil that is kept moist. It is wise to give them a two-inch layer of leaf mold each fall and apply an annual sprinkling of slow-release fertilizer just as the flower stalks begin to lengthen. If you need to divide or replant your Hellebores, the late summer or early fall is the best time – when they are coming out of dormancy and before they begin to bloom. When dividing, make certain to get a bit of crown with a growth bud and a leaf stalk with some of the rhizome and roots attached.

Very few pests and diseases other than black spot and aphids affect them. Black spot is a fungus that can be dealt with by either a fungicide or removing the damaged leaves and blooms and hoping for drier weather next year. Insecticidal soap works well for the aphids.

Hellebores produce many seeds. If you collect the seed it is best sown immediately. You will have better results with fresh seed than with seed that

has been stored. These plants hybridize quite easily and you will find your plants producing new colors over time with the generous help of our bumblebees. If you'd like to control the cross pollination yourself to stabilize attractive characteristics it is quite easy. A very complete and comprehensive source for learning how to breed and grow Hellebores is: *The Gardeners Guide for Growing Hellebores*, by Graham Rice and Elizabeth Strangman.

Hellebores are a known poisonous plant, even though they were grown over 2000 years ago for medical purposes. Do not consume any part of the plant. To be on the safe side, wear gloves when handling your plants to prevent any possible rashes from developing.

Visit your local nursery to obtain Hellebores. Some nurseries here in the Northwest that carry these plants are: Shorty's Nursery, Vancouver, WA; Portland Nursery, Portland, OR; Tsugawa's Nursery, Woodland, WA. Also check the web site at www.honeyhillfarmsnursery.com.



Hellebore hybrid



Hellebore hybrid showing leaf form

If you'd like to learn more about Hellebores and see some great photos, here are a few more websites to check out.

<http://www.plantdel.com/Tony/hellebores.html>

<http://www.hellebore.com/>

<http://hellebores.hort.net/>

<http://cube.icestorm.net/hellebores/>

<http://www.gardenweb.com/cyberplt/plants/hellebor.html>