



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Hellebores: Hardly Boring (Lifestyle November 2021)

by Pam, Wallace, UCCE Master Gardener

With autumn crisping the air, winter is just around the corner. Although it will be a relief to be rid of the Valley heat, we also dread the drab days of winter fog. The one thing that can brighten a dreary day is a flower in the garden, and that's why we love hellebores. They're among the first bloomers in very early spring, and some varieties will even flower in late winter.

Hellebores are evergreen perennials, so even when they're not flowering, the foliage is still attractive with large, shiny dark green leaves. Large colorful bell or saucer-shaped flowers droop down on a 45-degree angle for an extended bloom cycle. Flowers droop as a survival mechanism to rain, snow, and hail which could damage tender pollen grains.

Plant hellebores in well-drained soil enriched with plenty of organic matter. Plants prefer soil that is somewhat alkaline, which is perfect for us around here. They prefer moist, but not soggy soils in filtered sunlight to dense summer shade. Ideal conditions for this hot valley would be to plant hellebores under deciduous shade trees where they get some morning sun. Be sure to add mulch around the plants to conserve moisture. They are greedy feeders, and need most of their nutrients in the spring and summer. Timed-release fertilizers applied in the spring and again in late summer will carry the plants into full bloom. Monthly applications of liquid plant foods will keep the plants lush and growing rapidly.

Helleborus orientalis, Lenten Rose is the most popular hellebore forming a clump 2 feet in width. The leaves have no obvious stems and the branched flower stems can get 1 ft. tall with flowers ranging in colors from white, pink, purplish, cream and greenish, often spotted with deep purple. This plant is easier to transplant than any of the other types.

Helleborus niger, Christmas Rose, a white flowering species, frequently is in bloom during the holiday season. Folks in zone 7 can grow this species, but it grows poorly in zones 8-9, and that is why the Lenten Rose is sold in our area as the Christmas Rose. This is probably the cold hardiest of all the species and can most likely survive in zone 3. The most well known variety is "Potters Wheel" an exceptionally large flowering strain, with flowers up to 5".



Helleborus argutifolius, known as the "Corsican Hellebore" and a hybrid *H. x sternii*, are erect or sprawling, to 2-3 feet tall and wide. The leaves are blue green and sharply toothed. Leafy stems carry clusters of 2 inch pale green flowers from winter to spring. This is the best hellebore for our area because it is more heat tolerant and can take more direct sun. Look for the hybrid carrying the name "Starnes" or the variety "Pacific Frost".

Helleborus foetidus, whose name means "foul odor," has the dubious common name of "Stinking Hellebore". That's a misnomer, as the delicate, lacy foliage has an unusual but unobjectionable scent. Another name is "Bear's-Foot Hellebore". Plants and flowers are large. Clusters of inch wide flowers are light green with purplish-red edges, blooming winter into spring.

Hellebores have relatively few pests or disease problems. Aphids can be troublesome but are not considered a major problem. Washing the plant with water usually takes care of them. Rodents, rabbits and deer will not eat hellebores. All parts are poisonous, even the seeds, and should be handled with care.

Fall is a perfect time to add some hellebores to your garden. You won't regret it when the burst of blooms brightens winter with a promise of spring.

The Tulare-Kings County Master Gardeners will be available to answer your questions:

Ace Hardware, Visalia - 1st Sat./every month, 10 am-1 pm

Luis Nursery, Visalia - 2nd Sat./every month, 10 am-2 pm

Visalia Farmer's Market - 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8-11 am, 2100 W. Caldwell Ave (behind Sears Building)

Questions? Call us:

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