



HELLEBORES

NEW PLANT ON THE BLOCK

By Norm Phillips, UC Master Gardener

Commonly referred to as Christmas Roses (*Heleborus niger*), or the Lenten Rose (*H. orientalis*), Hellebores are in the same family as Ranunculus, Paeonia, Clematis and other well-known garden plants. Their taxonomic home is in the Ranunculaceae, (Buttercup) family. Large colorful bell or saucer-shaped flowers from Christmas through April droop down on a 45-degree angle. There is a natural explanation for this because of valley rain, sometimes hail, and snow in higher elevations. The drooping habit is a survival mechanism and the plants natural defense against these elements that kill pollen grains.

They can be broken down into two basic groups, the “Caulcescent” types, meaning those whose foliar parts are born on stems, such as the Corsican Hellebore (*H. argutifolius*), and the “Acaulescent” types whose foliage emanates from basal portion of the plant such as Lenten Rose (*H. orientalis*).

GROWING CONDITIONS: Plant in well-drained soil enriched with plenty of organic matter. Plants prefer soil that is somewhat alkaline but will grow in slight acid to neutral conditions. They prefer moist, but not wet soils in filtered sunlight to dense summer shade. Ideal conditions for this hot valley would be to plant hellebores under deciduous shade trees. 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 such as Osmocote applied in the spring and again in late summer will carry the plants into full bloom. Monthly applications of liquid plant foods such as “Peters and Miracle Grow” will keep the plants lush and growing rapidly.

PESTS AND DISEASES: 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. Poor air circulation and damp conditions can lead to bouts with Botrytis, but this is easily controlled by proper spacing; worst case scenarios may need a copper based fungicide. *Rodents, rabbits and deer will not eat hellebores. All parts are poisonous and should be handled with care.*

PROPAGATION: Hellebores can be propagated from seed or by divisions. Under ideal conditions they may self-sow, and young seedlings can be transplanted in early spring. Transplants will have a variety of colors and may not be like the parents. It takes 2-4 years for transplants to flower. The plants can be divided after flowering, although brittle roots make division of mature clumps difficult and older plants may not bloom for a year after being disturbed.

VARIETIES: *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 orientalis, Lenten Rose is the most popular hellebore. 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, is a white flowering species, commonly referred to as “Christmas Rose” as it 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. The specific species name, *niger* refers to its black roots. 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 foetidus, whose name means foul odor has the dubious common name of “Stinking Hellebore”. That’s a bad rap, 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.