

A Hellebore Primer

No shade garden is complete without a collection of Hellebores. Called Christmas Rose and Lenten Rose by common name, these plants are not roses at all. Instead, they are amazing perennials that help the gardener extend the flowering season, offering color in late winter and very early spring, just when you need it most. Hellebores also offer excellent foliage structure to the shade garden which often suffers from summer meltdown when the early spring bulbs and ephemeral wildflowers either go dormant or decline in the summer heat.

Hellebore aficionados are lucky to be gardening in these times. Extensive breeding work has been done all over the world, from New Zealand, to England, to Germany, and right here in the United States. Advances in tissue culture have allowed the introduction of dozens of new interspecific crosses and varieties in a relatively short period of time.

The first thing to realize about Hellebores is that most books call them evergreens. In Connecticut, this is really a misnomer. Yes, the leathery foliage does remain beautiful all during the late fall and into the early winter. But once the ice, sleet, and winter snows arrive, the leaves (if not buried under six foot high snow banks) can get very tattered, with blackening around the edges. Enjoy their leaves from late spring until late December. You will be cutting the old foliage off as soon as the snow melts and you can get to the plants because the older leaves detract from the beautiful, fresh new flowers.

The flower buds on Hellebores emerge in a few different ways.

Helleborus niger, the Christmas rose, is so named because in England, the pure white, upward facing flowers usually bloom at Christmas time. In southern Connecticut I have seen that happen only a few times, when the December temperatures were very mild. The flowers on *Helleborus niger* are already formed and curled up tight in the heart of the crown by November. If you poke around your fall garden, pull aside the fallen autumn leaves and you will see them. Now put those leaves back! They offer a bit of protection from the up and down temperature extremes those buds have to face. As soon as the weather permits, they will slowly unfurl. At that point, I cut off last year's Hellebore foliage. How do you recognize *Helleborus niger* by its leaves? Look for the circular leaf arrangement.

The flower buds of **Helleborus orientalis** arise from the center of the plant, but they form in late winter/early spring when new growth begins. The flower stems elongate and the flowers open on stalks that are from 15-24" tall. As soon as I see the buds forming, I cut off last year's leaves.

Helleborus foetidus, or the bearsfoot Hellebore, has a completely different habit. The plant grows upwards throughout the summer, eventually reaching a height of 24" tall. The end of each stem is swollen, and inside that swollen section are the flower buds that will emerge on top of the stems. Therefore, the buds are set on these plants in late summer and early fall. These are the EXCEPTION to the rule. NEVER cut them back in early winter. Instead, surround them with loose evergreen boughs for the first half of the winter.



Remove them in late February/March, or as soon as the snow melts enough that you see the buds peaking out and starting to open. The chartreuse flowers, edged in burgundy, are subtle but a welcome sight so early in the season. Another major difference with the way I treat this particular Hellebore is that I always let the flowers go to seed and ripen completely on the plant. I encourage the seeds to drop and sprout in the garden. I find that the mother plant, once it has flowers, usually wilts and dies. But I always have plenty of babies in the area that will quickly grow and set buds for the following winter.

Along with the three basic species, there are many others offered by specialty perennial nurseries. **Helleborus argutifolius** and **H. lividus** are both marginally hardy and grown primarily for their foliage as their flowers are not especially showy. However, they are key players in the breeding work that now offers us Hellebores galore!

Once you start delving into the breeding work and lineage of most of today's modern Hellebores, you will realize that *Helleborus orientalis*, the straight species, probably doesn't exist any more in the trade. Most are *Helleborus x orientalis*, which represent crosses with up to 15-18 species. If you cross two species, the resulting plant has an "x" in the name to indicate this. Many introductions are interspecific crosses. English breeders have given us **Helleborus x ericsmithii**. Now things get a bit more complex. *H. niger* was crossed with *H. x sternii*, which itself is an interspecific cross as described above! This work has resulted in some of the most magnificent Hellebores to date.

One of the original complaints that gardeners had about the Lenten rose (*Helleborus orientalis*) was that the flowers, although stunning, faced downwards and were hard to appreciate unless located above a stone wall or on a hillside with a walkway below. Therefore, much attention has been paid to developing Hellebores with *outward and upward facing flowers*. This offers a major breakthrough.

The **Immanence Series** from German breeder Josef Heuger were originally introduced as potted plants for the florist trade at Christmas time and in the winter. The creamy white flowers age to lime green and faced towards you, not down. The early introductions were seed strains. As their breeding work developed, the **H.G.C.** (*Helleborus Gold Collection*) designation was given to this group. These plants are vegetatively propagated using **tissue culture**. This is significant, in that you cannot grow these plants from seed and they are patented so it is illegal to propagate and sell these plants without paying a royalty fee. Tissue culture production insures uniformity in each and every plant and also makes these plants more readily available to the trade in a shorter period of time. *Helleborus x baillardiae* 'Pink Frost' is one of the very best Heuger hybrids. It is part of the "Early Spring" group as it blooms in late March and April. It has silvery frosted foliage. The flowers buds start off burgundy and the flowers open to silvery pink, turning back to burgundy as they age.

The H.G.C. "Christmas Collection" are plants that have much more *Helleborus niger* lineage in their breeding. H.G.C. 'Josef Lemper' is an excellent example of this group. The flowers are pure white, 3 ½" across, and outward facing. In bloom, it reaches 8-10" tall and will spread 12-15" across. This is a very compact plant that has the potential to begin blooming in February, with the flowers lasting till April or beyond.

No serious discussion of this new breed of Hellebores with upward facing flowers can take place with mentioning **Helleborus 'Ivory Prince'**, introduced by Plant Haven and developed by breeder David Tristram of England. It is dignified, elegant, and simply exquisite. What makes it so special? The flowers open white, turn to ivory, and then fade to a very elegant shade of muted peachy-coral. The leaves have silver veins and make the shade garden come alive, especially when combined with other silver foliage plants such as *Brunnera* 'Jack Frost' and 'Ghost' ferns (*Athyrium x filix-femina* 'Ghost'). My research into the breeding history of this plant uncovered that it is a very complex mix of *H. niger*, *H. x nigercors*, and *H. x ericsmithii*.

You cannot talk about American bred Hellebores without mentioning David Culp. Owner (together with his partner Michael Alderfer) of Brandywine Cottage in Pennsylvania, David has worked for more than 14 years selecting and breeding Hellebores. His plants are called **D.L.C.** (David L. Culp) or **Brandywine Hybrids** which are a blend of hand pollinated, open pollinated, and self-pollinated seedlings including singles and doubles, potted forms, and all colors.

Another American hard at work on Hellebores is Michigan breeder Chris Hansen of Great Garden Plants in Holland Michigan who has developed the **Winter Thrillers** series. An established plant can have up to 50 flowers on strong stems that rise well above the deep green foliage, 18-22" tall. Over 20 years of breeding work has resulting in these very vigorous and floriferous seed varieties which include 'Ballerina Ruffles', 'Wedding Ruffles', and 'Dark and Handsome'.

On the west coast, Northwest Garden Nursery of Eugene, Oregon has introduced the **Winter Jewels** series bred by the O'Byrnes. Years of hand pollinating and meticulous breeding work have resulted in striking flower forms, including singles, doubles, and varieties with very frilly centers. They have also concentrated on developing plants with slightly finer foliage than *H. orientalis* so that the flowers are not overwhelmed by the leaves. 'Cherry Blossom' is a stunner, with pink speckled flowers that have an intricate ruffled ring of deep cherry red in the center. Others from this series include 'Cotton Candy', 'Jade Tiger', 'Apricot Blush', and 'Sparkling Diamond'.

Hans Hansen, breeder extraordinaire from Walter's Gardens, has captured the hearts of Hellebore lovers everywhere with his **Wedding Bells** and **Honeymoon** series. Both are seed grown, with downward facing flowers, with both singles and doubles having a wide range of colors and markings. Popular varieties include 'Blushing Bridesmaid', 'Confetti Cake', 'Paris in Pink', and 'Spanish Flare'.

Other popular seed strains include the **Royal Heritage** and **The Lady** series. These are now considered older varieties, and are usually a bit less expensive, but still very garden worthy. With their prolific self-seeding tendencies, you may find all kinds of new and unusual colors and forms result if you transplant and grow on their babies.

A recent introduction is the **Frost Kiss Series**. These were bred in England by Rodney Davey. 'Anna's Red' and 'Penny's Pink' are two examples of this series that is noted for colorful mottled leaves blushed pink with silver markings.

Growing Hellebores in your Connecticut garden is basically quite easy as they are long lived, low maintenance plants. They like a compost enriched soil that is not waterlogged or heavy clay. Otherwise, they take a wide range of soil conditions and are pretty tolerant of our Connecticut soils. They like to be mulched to further increase the organic matter in the soil and retain moisture in the summer months when things dry out and the roots of the trees (that they are probably growing amongst) take up most of the available moisture. They work just fine in dry shade, but if yours are in maple tree roots or there is a prolonged drought, a couple of deep soakings and 2" of organic mulch (shredded bark or shredded leaves) would be ideal. They don't really need dividing, but can be transplanted or carefully split in very early fall, giving them a couple of months to root in when the soil temperatures are warm. When I transplant or divide mine, I always deep soak the roots with Organic Plant Magic compost tea to encourage feeder roots which help the plants to establish quickly.

Hellebore flowers and foliage are excellent for cutting and using in arrangements. I usually let my Hellebores go to seed if they are, in fact, a seed strain. I then search the surrounding area in late summer and fall for the many babies that appear, scoop them up, and place them around my shade gardens. The resulting plants won't be the same as their parents, but you never know what colors and patterns you might discover!

Many of the complex hybrids and tissue culture plants have sterile flowers, making the flowers a lot longer lasting as they do not set seed. You may find the petals changing colors and remaining attractive on the flowers stalks for up to 2-3 months!

One of the best reasons to plant Hellebores is that they are extremely deer and vole resistant. They are actually toxic to deer, who have been known to nibble on them when food sources are scarce.

One final thought. Consider using some of these amazing Hellebores in your spring container gardens. They combine beautifully with pansies, Violas, Nemesias, Diascias, Heucheras, and a host of other interesting annuals and perennials. One reason I like incorporating hardy plants into my container gardens is that when it comes time to redo them for a new season, the perennials go straight into the garden, adding to my permanent collection.

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