



## Hellebores Aren't Boring

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

As the snow starts to melt and the days grow longer, gardeners are searching for those first flowers emerging to mark the start of a new gardening year. Early bulbs like snowdrops and crocuses are welcome harbingers of the season to come but don't overlook the tantalizing blossoms of hellebores.



Sometimes referred to as the Christmas rose (*Helleborus niger*) or the Lenten rose (*H. orientalis*), hellebores are not related to roses but rather members of the ranunculaceae family along with aconites, columbines, trilliums and more. They got their monikers because of their bloom times, namely around the Christmas and Easter seasons and their delicate looking but tough blossoms are already making appearances throughout Connecticut, especially in more sheltered sites.

Hellebore image by Louise C.

Hellebores are found in the wild from southern and central Europe to China, Russia and Turkey. There are only about 20 distinct species and some cross readily. All hellebores are poisonous although their use as medicinal plants has been documented for hundreds of years. Reputedly, they have a bitter, burning taste and this makes for a great deer resistant plant. There have been reports of contact dermatitis in some individuals when handling bruised leaves, however.

Morphologically, hellebores are divided into two distinct groups. Caulescent forms produce foliage borne on stems while the foliage of acaulescent types arises from the base of the plant. Caulescent sorts include *H. argutifolius*, *H. foetidus* and *H. lividus*, which are all rather short-lived species but they produce lots of seeds. The seeds that germinate typically bloom in their second year, which is relatively quick for a hellebore.

Acaulescent species, like *H. niger* and *H. orientalis*, are more likely to be found at local garden centers. They are longer lived plants forming evergreen clumps that are slow to enlarge. If dividing ever becomes necessary do so in the cool early spring or fall months.

The Oriental hybrids (*H. orientalis*) have become quite popular these last couple of decades as tissue culture has made it easier to propagate them. Their color range has also expanded and includes creamy whites, pinks, black-purples, rosy-purples and yellows. Single, semi-double and double flower forms are making their debut. Flowers may have a picotee edge or attractive spotting. Some are facing upright while others are more bell-like in their stance.



Double Hellebore image by Louise C.

For all their beauty, hellebores are tough, attractive plants that would be a welcome addition to many gardens. They grow well in part shade to full sun but not in dry, hot parched conditions and can tolerate a range of soil pH from moderately acidic to alkaline. Hellebores require good drainage and will fail to thrive or even rot if planted in poorly drained locations.

Plants appreciate being grown in soils enhanced with additions of organic matter such as leaf mold, peat moss or a leaf-based compost. They are not particularly demanding as far as nutrients go but will benefit from an annual addition of an organic or similar complete fertilizer each spring.

Although they are evergreen plants, the foliage often looks a bit bedraggled once the snow melts. Trim off older, damaged leaves when going through your beds for their spring cleaning. Leaving them on during early flower bud development will protect the buds and also delay blooming a bit which helps during inclement weather.

Hellebores are in general quite well behaved plants growing about a foot high and slowly spreading, in the case of Oriental hybrids, to about 2 feet in width. While established plants are quite drought tolerant, younger or newer plants should be kept evenly moist over the growing season. A light mulch will help to keep in moisture.

Quite a number of hellebore hybrids are available and the best way to ensure you are getting the flower color you want is to buy the plant in bloom. There were quite a number of cultivars for sale at the Connecticut Flower & Garden Show this past year. Some Connecticut retail growers like the Garden Barn, Acer Gardens and White Flower Farm to name a few, offer a selection of hellebores. Visit them early in the season to see what's in bloom. Blossoms last several months and this is because the flower petals are actually a tougher plant part known as a modified calyx. When growing Oriental hybrids you may want to remove any seedpods formed as the seedlings will likely not look like the parents. On the other hand, this might be an interesting experiment to some.

Hellebores are a marvelous addition to the early spring garden. If you have a good site for them, plant a few this year and enjoy these tough plants for their beautiful flowers, undemanding lifestyle and mounds of green foliage throughout the winter.

For information about hellebores or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.