

Hellebores

Nature's Perfect Winter Gift

Dividing Hellebores

All Hellebores self-sow prolifically although the “babies” are not true to their parentage in color. Their clumping habit makes them very simple to divide when they are “teenage” plants.

- Select a plant with five or more, but less than ten flower stems.
- Dig up the plant in late winter or just as it starts to bloom.
- Dig a 6” circle around the plant, 8” deep into the soil. Loosen the plant on all sides; gently pry out of the soil and shake off any excess soil.
- Wash the roots with a strong spray turning the plant to rinse from all angles. Look for the natural divisions with at least one bud and some woody rhizome.
- Cut into no more than three clumps using a stainless steel knife with a sharp, serrated edge.
- Add compost, and plant the clumps in a hole three times as wide as the plant and slightly deeper than the roots.

Hellebores do not like being planted too deeply - just enough to cover the crown with soil. Press firmly in place, and cover with leaf mulch. Water newly-divided plants until frost, but don't overdo it. They don't like to be too wet.

BY SANDY PHELPS '02

Avid gardeners are always looking for that “perfect” plant.

One that has colorful blooms and interesting foliage. A plant untroubled by pests and deer. A plant that is drought tolerant, has four-season interest and is adaptable to a variety of soils and sunlight conditions. “Impossible to find,” one might say. I offer up the Hellebore as the perfect plant for our area.

The Hellebore is a non-native plant that has its “roots” in the southeastern region of Europe. Hellebores are evergreen and bloom generally from March through May. They tolerate both part sun and part shade and do extremely well in the dry shade conditions underneath limbed-up trees. These versatile perennials grow best in alkaline soils but will adapt to the acidic soils of woodlands. They were originally grown for their medicinal properties, as a poison or as an emetic. Their toxic alkaloids make them resistant to deer, voles and pesky insects. Hellebores are extremely easy to care for and are a low maintenance plant. Once established they require very little water and need only compost and leaf mulch as fertilizer. Am I convincing you yet of their perfection?

There are five main varieties of Hellebores on the market.

Helleborus niger, the Christmas Rose, blooms from January to March and bursts forth through the snow on a sunny winter day. It has dark green smooth foliage and small

pure white nodding flowers that turn a pale pink with age. The Christmas Rose is a bit more difficult to grow in our area than other types but will do well in a protected microclimate of some gardens.

Helleborus orientalis is known as the Lenten Rose because it blooms in March. It has leathery, green foliage and green, cream-to-pale pink blooms on 1-3'H stems.

Helleborus foetidus is also called the Stinking Hellebore. This is a misnomer, as only its finger-like leaves and not the flowers smell of skunk when crushed. Its pendant blooms are muted yellow green with purple margins. This Hellebore grows best in part shade and dry-to-medium soils. Do not cut the spent stems early, as the new buds are formed on the previous year's growth.

Helleborus odorus is Fragrant Hellebore and has a gentle sweet scent, but, to some sensitive noses, a slightly skunky odor. The 20” tall plant has lime green blooms that fade to a pale green.

The most popular Hellebore on the market today and one well-suited for our county is **Helleborus orientalis x hybridus**. This vigorous Lenten Rose is a 2' x 2' clump-forming, sturdy plant with hand-shaped foliage. It has numerous cultivars in very showy colors such as deep purple, white, pink, and yellow with speckled, star-shaped and even double blossoms. Pennsylvania based hybridizer David Culp is well known for his new cultivars of Hellebores.

