

Hellebores on A Winter Parade

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I'm not sure where I was or what I was doing, but I am certainly late to the game, as it comes to growing Hellebores. I don't know why, it's not like I didn't know about them or didn't have an opportunity with the right growing conditions. But like many a "convert", I am now pretty obsessed! I'm growing divisions from friends & from family, have purchased nursery plants, and in a sweet case of kismet, some baby hellebores came along for the ride in another plant purchase, so my witch hazel is now surrounded by itty bitty hellebores!



These well-loved perennials, often commonly known as Lenten roses, have been called "winter roses", "nature's gift to winter", even "the perfect perennial". I've even seen them called "Hellebrrrrs", which is pretty perfect in my estimation, given their ability to bounce back from freezing rain and cold. Hellebores just seem to ignore it all and continue their flower show! Besides being able to tolerate the varied weather spells of the Piedmont and keep on blooming, hellebores have many other attractions. They are tough plants, growing readily in dry shade.



The foliage is evergreen, at least in our area, adding a nice all-season textural component to the landscape. The flower show is long lasting, going on for several months. The *Helleborus* genus is actually quite large, with many wild species from which to choose. *Helleborus niger* (the Christmas hellebore), *H. foetidus* (Stinking hellebore), and *H. argutifolius* (the Corsican hellebore) are just a couple of

examples, along with many wonderful interspecies hybrids. However, *H. orientalis* (the Lenten rose) and its many, many, many hybrids are perhaps the most widely known and grown.

This Zone 6-9 shade loving perennial can be used as a specimen plant, as ground cover, or even naturalized in a woodland setting. I actually grow some of mine in large containers and they appear to be quite happy. Hellebores are largely pest-free and also DEER RESISTANT, which is a huge plus! Tough and hardy, hellebores are easy to grow. So much so in fact, that a garden gift of hellebore that I forgot all about planting has been blooming happily the last two years on top of the ground in the soil that it came home on. Perhaps this year, I really should get around to planting it - imagine just how much better it will bloom!

Once established, hellebores are relatively drought tolerant. While hellebores will tolerate full shade, they are most happy in well drained, humusy soils in partial shade. Too wet soil encourages rot and dense shade inhibits flower production, as does planting too deeply. They require little in terms of maintenance, but the current year's flower show can be more easily seen if the prior year's foliage is trimmed back. As noted above with my "free-loading" nursery pot surprises, hellebores readily re-seed, which means you can add to your own and to friends' hellebore collection in no time!



Good garden companion plants include ferns, epimediums, pulmonarias, and short grasses like acorus and carex. But, call me a purist, in my mind you really can't beat the look of a swath of hellebores blooming in the winter! With blooms starting in late winter into early spring, except for true blue or red, the bell-shaped flowers can be found in virtually any shade, predominantly whites and pinks. To get the particular shades or colors you want, just make sure to buy them while in bloom. The flower choices are varied as well - single, double, some with picotee edges.



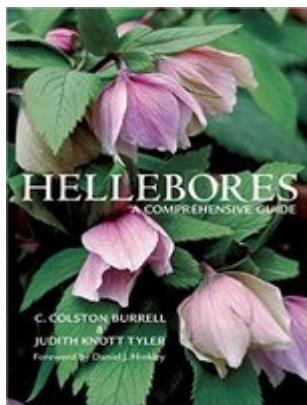
Perhaps not as widely known, hellebores make a nice cut flower. I've read that for a more long lasting bloom, it's best to condition the ends first by lowering the stem end into boiling water for about 15 - 20 seconds. I've also read this is not necessary - either by waiting until the flower stamens have dropped off before

cutting, which is said to reduce the chance of foliage wilting, or waiting to arrange your hellebores until the foliage has perked up from a day or two stay in water.



My own experience with them as a cut flower is much simpler. The blossoms look great floating in a bowl. And I never bother either searing the ends or waiting to arrange - some stay nice, while others look a bit tatty in a few days, but I love them either way. It may very well have something to do with the species or variety. Part of the fun of gardening is the experimentation, so see what happens for you!

It has been said by the good folks at Wing Haven Gardens that the noted Piedmont garden writer, Elizabeth Lawrence, author of well-respected books, such as *Gardens in Winter*, is responsible for introducing the hellebore to this area of the country - and I for one, wish to thank her! A visit to Wing Haven is a great chance to see a nice collection of hellebores.



For those interested in learning more, American Horticultural Society Book Award Winner, *Hellebores, A Comprehensive Guide*, by C. Colston Burrell & Judith Knott Tyler, is a great resource