

A Little Bit of Spring for Winter

Winter is often a time of year for subtleness in the garden. It is a time to be more alert in order to perceive the myriad small flowers clinging to lanky stems or hovering close to the cold ground. The problem for many is the failure to take the time to walk, look and appreciate these small wonders. Over 25 years ago, I read of a genus named *Helleborus* that bloomed from January through March. The flowers ranged from white to green to a deep purple. At the time, I could not understand why these plants were not more popular. We all need color in the winter garden! The problem was a lack of information, compounded by poor availability and demand from the growers. Obviously, the first problem we can solve.

Hellebores are primarily native to mountainous woodland and open meadows of Western Europe, growing on well drained, humus rich soils. These soils are often calcareous in nature (derived from limestone), and have a pH near neutral (7). Interestingly, although most of the species can be found in the former Yugoslavian Republic, the most commonly planted species is *Helleborus orientalis*, native to Western Turkey north into Georgia.

Helleborus orientalis, more commonly known as Lenten Rose is usually represented in gardens by its innumerable hybrids, which are given the designation of *Helleborus x hybridus*. These are really great plants!! The foliage is dark green and leathery, with very fine serrations along the leaf margin. The leaves remain an attractive green into January, when they start to collapse and discolor. The foliage should be removed in early February, providing an unobstructed view of the flowers to follow. Lenten Rose is an acaulescent (stemless) Hellebore, since the flowers are produced from the crown of the plant, and not from the tip of the preceding years growth. Depending upon the plant, the flowers can be white, pink, purple, bicolor, or spotted. Planted in mass, they make a wonderfully cheery show for late winter and early spring. Recently, there have been a number of hand-pollinated strains released, which show improved flower color and form. Some of the more interesting strains are Royal Heritage featuring more dark purples, Brandywine that features semi-double and double flowering forms and Sunshine with light pinks and whites. Mixed with Snowdrops, Red Stemmed Dogwoods, or some of the many winter blooming Witchhazels, all the strains will create a beautiful sparkle to the winter garden.

Another fine species of Hellebore is *Helleborus foetidus*, the Stinking Hellebore or Bears Foot Hellebore. Native to England and most of Western Europe, this is a garden workhorse. The leaves are finely dissected into 6 or 8 'leaflets', providing a fine foliage plant for the summer and fall. Around the end of December the flower buds swell at the tip of the previous years stems (caulescent), and flowers begin to emerge in early to mid January! The flowers are chartreuse to green, often with purple rims around the tips of the flowers. To some the flowers have a fetid (hence the species epithet of *foetidus*) odor. To me, it smells more like a Gin and Tonic, providing all the more reason to enjoy the winter garden! The original plant will last 3-5 years, but will produce a bevy of seedlings that will ultimately create a great groundcover.

Aside from locating them with winter interest companions, all Hellebores require a well-drained location and prosper with afternoon shade. All are drought tolerant, provide ample seedlings for naturalizing and are deer resistant! Fortunately they have become much easier to find and all are a must addition for your favorite winter garden.