

History and Update on the World of Hellebores®

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HELLEBORES: SPECIES AND IMPORTANT EARLY HYBRIDIZERS

A working knowledge of the available species is of major importance in breeding programs. Sowing species seed provides potential hybridizers with variable progeny from which can be selected potential parental individuals displaying desirable characteristics. In the case of hellebores, these characteristics include both floral and foliar features combined with overall vigor.

SPECIES

Helleborus argutifolius. Native southern Europe/Corsica. Handsome caulescent specimen. A superb performer in the Pacific Northwest. Magnificent, variable foliage.

The bold foliage creates an attractive contrast with the heavy effect of conifer foliage, i.e., *Thuja*.

Cultivars: 'Janet Starnes', speckled cream leaves; 'Pacific Frost', heavy cream foliage speckling.

Helleborus foetidus. Native to central Europe. Caulescent species with handsome variable foliage and terminal clusters of pendulous bell-shaped flowers. Short lived but self-seeds freely. Often flowers in second year from seed—blooms late winter, early spring.

Cultivars: 'Sienna', dark green foliage and chartreuse flowers. Selected by Will McLewin—noted English species authority; Wester Flisk Group, red-stemmed form from east Scotland (Seeding progeny quickly loses this desirable trait if grown with non-red-stemmed forms. Doubtful if the original form exists; most are now selections from seedling strains.); Red Silver strain, a Wester Flisk Group cross with silvered leaves and reddish stems, Northwest Garden Nursery introduction; 'Gold Bullion' a variable seed strain with yellow foliage.

Helleborus multifidus. Native to Balkans. A caulescent species with arguably the most handsome foliage of any species. Two subspecies: *H. multifidus* subsp. *hercegovinus*, deeply divided leaf segments and *H. multifidus* subsp. *bocconeii*, more shallowly divided leaf segments. Possibly less hardy of the two subspecies and sometimes considered a separate species.

***Helleborus niger* (Christmas rose)**. Native to north Italy, northern Balkans. A very variable caulescent species. Early flowering forms and pink-colored flowered selections desirable.

Cultivars: 'Potter's Wheel', a large-flowered seedling; 'Joseph Lempet', an impressive uniform, large-flowered German seed strain; 'Edelweiss Strain', a repeat, long-flowering seedling strain from Vas Baltensperger.

Helleborus odorus. Native to the Balkans, southern Hungary, and southern Romania. Early flowering acaulescent species. Fragrant chartreuse to dark green flowers

and attractive, variable divided foliage.

***Helleborus orientalis* (Lenten rose).** Native to northeast Greece, northern Turkey, and Caucasian Russia. Most variable and colorful flowered of all species with great visual impact. Several subspecies with white, purple, yellow, and variably spotted flowers. Freely hybridizes and forms the basis for the enormously popular *H. ×hybridus* complex.

Helleborus purpurascens. Native to east and central Europe. Acaulescent species closely related to *H. orientalis*. Outstanding foliage and attractive plum-purple flowers.

Helleborus viridis. Native to western Europe. An infrequently encountered species with handsome nodding intense-green flowers and coarsely divided, toothed foliage. An important species for hybridization.

Helleborus atrorubens. Native to Northwest Balkans. A caulescent species with exquisite variable purple-green flowers. Rare in cultivation and susceptible to black-spot in wet areas.

Helleborus dumetorum. Native to central Europe. Acaulescent species with delicate green nodding flowers. A charming garden plant and important for introducing green flowers into hybrids.

Helleborus cyclophyllus. Native to Greece, southern Balkans. Attractive, rounded, outward-facing green flowers. Important in hybridization. Fully deciduous foliage and probably less hardy than its close relative *H. odoratus*.

Helleborus lividus. A Majorcan endemic. The most tender species and best grown in a cool greenhouse. Highly attractive mottled, slate-green, three-lobed leaves. Rosy pink flowers. Very important in hybridization: *H. ×sternii* (*H. lividus* × *H. argutifolius*).

Helleborus thibetanus. Native to central China. Acaulescent species of recent introduction imports in the mid 1990s. Emerges in early spring with pale rose-pink nodding flowers susceptible to late frost damage. Totally summer dormant. Not easy to cultivate, requires adequate moisture and performs well in Pacific Northwest. Potential for future hybridization.

Helleborus torquatus. Native to Balkans. Extremely variable acaulescent species in size, form and flower color. Outward facing plum-purple flowers often display green interiors.

Two double forms, 'Dido' and 'Aeneas' were discovered in the wild by Elizabeth Strangman, noted English hybridizer — these formed the basis for future double-flowered hybrids. Picotee-flowered selections also rose from this species.

Helleborus vesicarius. Native to southern Turkey. An uncommon, difficult-to-grow, acaulescent species prized by collectors. Nodding, bell-shaped green and red flowers. Summer dormant. Requires good drainage.

EARLY ENGLISH HYBRIDIZERS

Helen Ballard, "Queen" of hybridizers, established the "standards of excellence" from the mid 1980s–1990s. Traveled since the early 1960s collecting outstand-

ing forms of wild species. Her progeny produced vigorous plants with beautifully shaped, pure richly colored flowers. My Royal Heritage Strain, originated from seed received from Helen Ballard, a vigorous seedling strain with various colored flowers and handsome foliage. Gisela Schmiemann continued Helen Ballard's work in Germany leading to the Lady Series seedling progeny of which produces broadly uniform-colored flowers.

John Massey and Kevin Belcher further developed Ballard plants at Ashwood Nursery, creating the Ashwood Garden Hybrids with include many fine doubles. No named selections have been introduced.

Elizabeth Strangman, Washfield Nursery. Developed the beautiful dark purple Queen of the Night strain plus others with slaty blue-colored blooms and some outstanding picotee flowers. Interesting doubles were raised from her wild collected "Dido" and "Aenaeu".

Robin and Sue White-Blackthorn Nursery, Hampshire, England. Created several outstanding strains. *Helleborus niger* Blackthorn Group (*H. argentifolius* × *H. niger*). Strong, easily grown plant with bouquets of long-lasting flowers. Sterile but produced by tissue culture. *Helleborus ×sternii* Blackthorn Group (*H. argentifolius* × *H. lividus*) — very blue foliage and creamy, dusty-pink flowers. Fertile, seed grown.

Party Dress Doubles—from "Dido", with larger, ruffled flowers in shades of mauve, pink, cream, and green.

Lady Heathcoat Amory, Knightshayes Court, Devon, England. In her superb woodland garden, Lady Heathcoat Amory perfected a fine vigorous purple-flowered *H. ×hybridus* strain. "Blood" of these were incorporated into the Royal Heritage Strain.

Beth Chatto Chatto Gardens, Essex, England, noted plantswoman, gardener, and author. Expounded the value of hellebores both in the garden and for indoor arrangements in winter. Rescued *H. ×hybridus* "Eric's Best", a handsome heavily spotted flower from the late Eric Smith. He considered it his best hellebore hybrid; he was of course best known for his outstanding pioneer work with hostas.

CULTURE

- Well drained moisture retentive rich soil.
- Partially shaded location.
- Remove old foliage just prior to flowering within the *H. ×hybridus* group, improves appearance and reduces disease potential.
- "Black death" disease causes blackening of foliage and stems. Cause is uncertain; must destroy infected plants.

USE

- Tough, long lived and most are hardy from Zones 4–9.
- Beautiful evergreen foliage of year-round interest.
- Combine with bulbs (i.e., *Narcissus*, *Galanthus*), *Arum italicum*, *Daphne*, and *Edgeworthia chrysantha* (shrub with attractive fragrant flowers in late winter into spring).
- *Helleborus argentifolius* an outstanding container plant.