



Deep in midwinter the white brightness of the Christmas rose lights up the garden's shady corners. **Bonnie Yuill** takes a look at hellebore history and horticulture

SEASON'S ESSENTIALS

Known to Culpeper as the Christmas herb and described by the sixteenth century herbalist, Gerard, as the 'Christe herbe' because '... it floureth about Christmas, if the winter be mild and warm. . .', *Helleborus niger* is thought to have been introduced by the Romans and is one of the oldest cultivated plants in Britain.

Legend has it that Gabriel produced the first hellebore blooms in the dead of winter for Madelon, a shepherdess the

angel discovered sorrowfully weeping because she had no gift for the new-born Christ; the Cornish name for the Christmas rose is 'The Virgin's Mantle', and in medieval times it was often planted alongside garden paths and near front doors to ward off evil.

The species name *niger* and common name 'black hellebore' refer to the colour of the roots, not the flower; novice gardeners can be startled when they first notice that the nodding flowers are white,

not black as they might have been expecting. The five-petalled blooms are often tinged pink, can be up to 8cm (3in) across, open early and flower throughout the coldest, shortest days of winter.

Native to Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia and northern Italy, *Helleborus niger* is a short, evergreen species with dark, leathery leaves split into seven to nine leaflets, often toothed towards the tips. It is a challenge to grow well and is often short-



Medicinal uses through history

The black hellebore is toxic when taken in all but the smallest doses. As such its use must always be supervised by knowledgeable, professional practitioners of herbal medicine.

The word 'hellebore' is Greek in origin and came to be used for any plant supposed

to cure madness: black hellebore was said to expel black bile, which was thought to cause mental disorders when produced in excess. The plant was also known as 'melampodium' after Melampus, a fifteenth century Greek shepherd who was said to have noticed its soothing effect on his over-skittish goats; Paracelsus added it to his Elixir of Life, and one of its earliest uses was to combat head lice.

The root is anthelmintic (it has the power to destroy intestinal parasites, mainly worms); it contains cardiac glycosides, similar in effect to those in *Digitalis* spp., and was used to treat dropsy and other heart conditions in the elderly; it is diuretic, emetic, irritant and a drastic purgative, was used to treat amenorrhoea and has caused abortion. It was used in medicine right up until the eighteenth century but its toxicity means it has fallen out of favour.

The stinking hellebore, *H. foetidus*, was used in the treatment of coughs and wheezing in horses, for humans as a drastic emetic and according to Gerard for 'mad and furious men'; *H. niger* was called 'black rooted' to distinguish it from the white hellebore, *Veratrum album*, but both were used as rat poisons.

lived. It prefers a part-shaded site on deep, humus-rich, well-drained but not dry or limy soil. Hybrids of *H. niger* include *H. Louis Cobbett*, one of the earliest varieties with pinkish blooms and dark red stems and probably the best-known, and *H. Potter's Wheel*, which has white flowers up to 13cm (5in.) across, comprising five broad, overlapping petals; 'Praecox' supposedly flowers more dependably at Christmas, but can still be variable.

Architectural

Hellebores are essential winter and spring plants and many gardeners, whether new or already devoted, discover that they can become grand passions. In most forms the flowers are actually sepals and come in a range of muted colours from cream-blushed purples, through plum to pink, to yellows, greens and blue-blacks, many with delicate spotting on the inside.

Their foliage is valuable as an architectural form in the garden throughout the year and they are good companion plants intermingling happily with snowdrops from winter through to spring, self-sowing freely and in cosy combination.

Hellebores are members of the *Ranunculaceae* family and have around 16 species of clump-forming evergreen or deciduous plants distributed widely throughout Europe, with outposts in China and Syria. Some are shade-lovers, others enjoy sunny situations. Most species fall into the long-lived, stemless group, with leaves and flowerheads rising separately from the woody crown and rarely reaching more than 45cm (18in) in height. In the second group are *H. argutifolius*, *H. lividus*, *H. x sternii*, and *H. foetidus*. These are relatively short lived plants (up to five years) with upright, semi-woody stems of up to 1.2m (4ft) that carry both the foliage and clusters of flowers.

Stemless hellebores can be propagated from seed and by division,



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and the semi-woody varieties are increased from seed.

Everyone is able to find space for some of the Lenten hellebores, hybrids based on *H. orientalis* (botanically they are *H. x hybridus*) which are among the easiest and quickest to grow. They are tough, seed freely and flower later in the year than the Christmas rose.

Seed of all species is best sown in pots while fresh, in summer, and placed outdoors in a cold frame or sheltered corner and kept moist. Germination is usually during the following winter and is often highly successful. Hellebores are promiscuous so plants grown from seed collected from garden plants are unlikely to resemble the parent.

The hellebore has its devotees, but it must be remembered that it was used by the Greeks to poison the wells of their enemies, and some historians believe that Alexander the Great may have died from an accidental overdose, perhaps insisting on a very strong dose in his impatience to get well.