

April 26, 2017



HELLEBORES

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The wonderfully wet winter has finally yielded to spring! Gardeners are returning to their gardens, looking to see which plants have survived the rainy deluge of the 2016-17 season. In February the hellebores sprang to life, brightening the dark season. Commonly known as Lenten roses (*H. orientalis*) or Christmas roses (*H. niger*), they take center attention until late spring and even into early summer. Hellebores (genus: *Helleborus*) are not as well-known or recognized as many of our other beautiful perennials, but once discovered by gardeners, they easily become a favorite. There are about 20 known species of this glorious, flowering plant of the *Ranunculaceae* family, an herbaceous evergreen at home in most El Dorado County gardens and landscapes.

Some refer to this lovely, Eurasian plant as a “snooty” plant because of its undeserved reputation as being hard to grow. To the contrary — they are a hardy species, resisting temperatures of -20 degrees or more. They are the aristocrats of the woodland garden, sporting such names as Ivory Prince, Kingston Cardinal, Winter Jewels, Rose Quartz and King Red. In February, however, we deserve to see aristocratic life in our gardens. Each flower, about the size of the palm of one’s hand, usually has five petals, colors varying from pink-chartreuse-white, to dusty shades of rose, purple and maroon. Many of the hybrids are multi-petalled, spreading white with purple or pink-fringed edges. What a sight! Even the newer, golden-colored varieties radiate eye-catching beauty.

During their second season, and thereafter, hellebore seedlings will appear around the mother plant, like a litter of young. Although they will grow into beautiful plants as well, they will be different from the plant that produced the seeds, for most hellebores are hybrids and will revert to some variation of the plants that produced the hybrid. Once established, hellebores usually do best in partial shade, although they may thrive in full sun if planted in a well-prepared soil. Many of the newer hybrids can be enjoyed without getting on your hands and knees. With flowers facing outward and growing on longer, multi-flowered stems, hybrids exhibit superior performance over the Lenten rose of yesteryear.

Gardeners will appreciate that hellebores are resistant to, or tolerant of deer, drought, rabbits and excessive shade. A little-known fact about this plant is that it has a reputation for being poisonous. The

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Greek root word hele translates as “take away,” or causing vomiting because of its emetic nature, and bora translates as “food.” The plant should be placed in an area where pets do not have access to it. They are deep-rooted, and prefer a rich soil, with plenty of available moisture and nutrients during their flowering period, but they also require excellent drainage. They like to be fed in early spring, and again in August/September when the new flower buds are being initiated, and if you mulch, take care not to mulch into the crown of the plant as it can cause the buds to rot. A seaweed fertilizer is good, but blood and bone fertilizers can also be used.

Your plant can be increased by division in early spring, but many people prefer to divide plants in September. New divisions may be slow to establish due to lack of fine roots, but will probably do so in due time. When dividing plants, you will notice that there are many tangled roots. Divide as carefully as you can, but you may have to use a serrated knife to separate the new divisions from the mother plant. *Helleborus foetidus* and *H. argutifolius* are not suitable for division, but can be raised by sowing fresh seed early in the year. If you have either of the aforementioned varieties, cut off flowered stems at ground level, but for other varieties, deadhead spent flowers only. Plants grown from seed will not flower until the second or third year. If you are in a hurry, just buy some plants at your nursery. Happy gardening!

This coming Saturday, April 29 is the seventh annual Spring Plant Sale hosted by the El Dorado County Master Gardeners. Over 5,000 plants, including vegetables, herbs, perennials, shrubs, grasses, succulents, and some trees will be available from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden located at 6699 Campus Drive, Placerville. Only cash or checks will be accepted.

The Sherwood Demonstration Garden (SDG) is now open thru October, weather permitting, Fridays and Saturdays 9 a.m. till noon. Be sure to check out the stunning hellebores in the Shade Garden.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at [311 Fair Lane in Placerville](http://311FairLanePlacerville.com). For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at [http://ucanr.edu/mastergardener e-news](http://ucanr.edu/mastergardener-e-news). You can also find us on Facebook.