

Hellebore: What's in a Name? And would it be as sweet?
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Christina Lacie

The early blooming, herbaceous perennial Hellebore is surrounded by ancient myths, inspirational legends, biblical tales, rumors of its use in toxic witch's potions and as a biological weapon in 600 BC when the Athenians captured Kirrha. In modern medicine, a compound from the root of the *Helleborus niger* is used to treat cardiovascular disease (Helebrin). Despite its rousing ups and noxious downs in the medicinal arena, a Hellebore in the garden levels the playing field (just don't ingest the leaves they are poisonous).

Helleborus is a small genus (approximately 20 species) in the *Ranunculaceae* family. There are two groups of Hellebore: **caulescent** and **acaulescent**. The **caulescent** group has a well-developed stem above ground and a simple root system that is not easily divided for propagation. They are shorter lived and begin to fade after 3-4 seasons. *H. argutifolius* (Corsican hellebore), *H. foetidus* (Stinking hellebore) and *H. Lividus* (Majorcan hellebore) are the three species in this group. The **acaulescent** group is without visible stems. They divide easily and are easy to grow. Two particularly notable species in this group are: the *H. niger* (Christmas Rose) is first to bloom anytime from December to March. The second is the *H. orientalis* (Lenten Rose) blooming a bit later.

The Hellebore prefers dappled shade and well-drained soil. Once established, the plant is moderately drought tolerant. However, withholding nutrients and water in the summer is stressful and can reduce winter blooms. Lucky for us, the Hellebore is deer, rodent and slug resistant. Yay! They like to stay put (so avoid transplanting). Because the Hellebore's buds are formed in summer, they can be divided in early spring, no later. The five petals of the flowers are actually sepals. Unlike petals, the sepals do not fall off. The flowers bloom in one color and fade to another color. Dead foliage can be cut back in late winter and the flowers can be cut after the seeds have ripened.

With its early blooms, the Hellebore is good for lifting the waning spirit in the dark days of winter. It is a great addition to your garden's repertoire and deer, rodent and slug resistant to boot. A plant doesn't get much sweeter than that.