

Hellebore FAQs

By Post Office Farm Nursery

My Hellebores aren't flowering what am I doing wrong?

The most common reason why hellebores don't flower well is a lack of light during winter. If they are planted in heavy shade in winter, typically under evergreen trees or large shrubs, they won't flower as well. You will get best flowering from your Hellebores if they have full sun or as near to it as possible during the winter months.

Other possible causes can be a lack of nutrition – fertilise them in autumn. Also if they are planted in very sandy soil they can struggle to thrive and flower.

Oh and the smaller one year old seedlings we sell through mail order or at various Plant Fairs during the year will usually not flower until winter the following year – so just be patient with those ones.

My Hellebores are covered in aphids how can I get rid of them?

If the Earth were ever to be struck by an asteroid large enough to wipe out all life on the planet, my personal view is that a small but determined population of aphids (and maybe a few cockroaches) would probably survive. They are that kind of creature. In the absence of armageddon you will need to spray them - with extreme prejudice. While the choice of what to spray them with is up to you – the method used is probably more important.

If you want to be less toxic on the environment you can use the contact action pyrethrum/garlic/chilli type sprays which are readily available at nurseries and hardware stores. If you are happy to be a bit less wholesome then you can try systemic sprays such as Confidor which will last a bit longer.

Either way it is most important to get good coverage with your spray, especially on underside of foliage which is where the aphids mostly reside. Secondly you will need to spray several times to get on top of the aphids – probably three sprays a week apart with the contact type sprays. And then keep an eye on the plants to make sure the aphids don't make a triumphant return.

I reckon it is best to invest in a 2-5 litre pressurized spray unit with a hose and wand. This will allow much easier access to the plants than using the little hand pump packs. It will also result in more spray on the plants and less on you and you can buy the spray concentrates to mix up and save money.

What should I feed my Hellebores?

Best type of fertilizer for Hellebores is a 'complete' one. By complete we mean a fertilizer which has all three major elements plants need for nutrition: nitrogen (N), phosphorous (P) and potassium(K). Most commercially available fertilizers are 'complete' and have N, P and K present. Just check on the pack. Blood and bone is not complete (no K). Hellebores will need the K for flowering.

So liquid, controlled release, powdered, organic or otherwise, the main thing is the 'complete' bit. And applying it at the right time of the year: mid autumn through to end of winter is best. Hellebores like plenty of feed, so there is little risk of overfeeding. We use a controlled release fertilizer in the nursery. This can be a good way to go in the garden as well, just one application in Autumn is all that is required.

In addition to the complete fertilizer Hellebores will also appreciate an annual light dressing with Dolomite lime which provides calcium and magnesium which Hellebores also enjoy. Same timing as for the fertilizer.

Should I cut the old foliage off my Hellebores?

Although removing the old foliage of Hellebores is not essential, it is a good practice.

By autumn the foliage of many Hellebores will be looking a bit past its best and the plants will be about to put on new seasons growth. For *Helleborus x hybridus* this will see firstly new flower stems followed by new foliage.

When signs of new shoots coming up from the base of the plant are evident, typically during autumn with the exact timing varying a bit from year to year, then the time is perfect to cut off all the old foliage, before flowering. Cut it all off right down to the base, leaving any nice new growth.

This will have the benefit of showing off the flowers better, tidying up the plant and getting better air movement through the plant over Winter, preventing possible fungal problems.

It is important to note that the above comments apply to the most common type of Hellebores, the low clump forming *Helleborus x hybridus*. For the taller growing species such as *Helleborus argutifolius*, *Helleborus foetidus* and *Helleborus x sternii*, which flower a bit differently to the hybrids, the timing is different. For these species the old flowering stems get removed after flowering, typically in mid to late spring when some new shoots are evident around the base of the plant.

If I plant my nice new Hellebores with the ordinary ones I have in the garden, will they 'revert' to the same colour as the ordinary ones?

No. The belief that somehow Hellebores will change their flower colour due to the presence of other Hellebores is a myth. Silly one too. Without getting into too much detail it seems to be based on i) a fundamental misunderstanding of the process of 'pollination' by bees and ii) observations about Hellebore flower colour changing over time.

Hellebores rely on bees for pollination. This involves the transfer of pollen from one flower to another flower on either the same or a different plant. After pollination the ovaries of the flower which has received pollen will be fertilized and will eventually produce seed which will drop from the plant and germinate into a new plant. Pollen from the anthers of a white flowered Hellebore being placed on the stigmas of a reddish flowered Hellebore may produce seedlings which could be pink flowered. However, the process of pollination does nothing to change the genetic makeup and hence flower colour of the original two parent plants.

Observations of Hellebores 'changing' flower colour are based on reality, but do not involve the plant 'reverting'. There are three likely explanations.

Firstly, unlike many other plants, the flowers on Hellebores do not drop off, but are persistent on the plant over a very long period. Typically a Hellebore flower may first flower during say July or August but will stay on the plant until at least October or November unless removed earlier. Over this 3-4 month period the colour of the flower will often gradually fade. White flowers will tend to fade to green, pink to a brownish colour. So if you look at your white flowered Hellebores during peak flowering in July or August, they will be white. However by October or November these same flowers will have faded to a greenish colour.

Secondly, if Hellebores are allowed to drop a lot of seed the seedlings may over a period of years effectively swamp and take over from the original plant. This can sometimes give the impression that a Hellebore has changed colour when in fact it is the flowers of a later generation of plants that is being observed.

Finally, Hellebores will sometimes flower out of season (for example in late spring or summer) and in such cases the flower colour will not be typical of the true flower colour when the plant flowers normally in Winter.

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