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Hellebores

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A photograph of a garden path lined with hellebores, with a large tree on the right and a hedge on the left.

Woodland wonders

Owner of Woodend's Post Office Farm Nursery and respected hellebore grower *Peter Leigh* talks about his favourite species and shares tips on how to grow these surprisingly hardy plants.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER LEIGH, JAMES GIFFORD
AND SIMON GRIFFITHS

Over the past decade or so, hellebores have enjoyed a deserved resurgence in popularity. Their slowly emerging flowers in the middle of winter, attractive evergreen foliage and tolerance of the tough Australian climate have turned them into must-have plants for cooler gardens. The following species and hybrids are the best garden performers and toughest of the hellebores. But before we talk about our top six, a few general observations about hellebores will help us to understand and get the best out of these plants in the garden.

Too much shade?

One of the most common misunderstandings about growing hellebores is that their position should be in year-round heavy shade. In the wild, hellebores are often found in or near deciduous woodland. Under such conditions they are shaded during summer, but have good light in winter. So, for best growth and flowering, try positioning your hellebores under or near deciduous trees or shrubs, or where the angle of the sun in winter will provide good light.

The flowering time of hellebores will vary a little with season and climate but is typically between June and September – with July and August the peak months. An attraction of hellebores is the longevity of their flowering. Each individual flower can look good for weeks as, unlike many other plants, the flowers will persist on the plant rather than fall off. Over many weeks these flowers will often fade from the original colour – a pink flowering hellebore may fade to tan; a white may fade to green.

Highly recommended

The hellebore that I recommend most often to gardeners is the winter rose or, more correctly, *Helleborus x hybridus*. Previously these were known as *Helleborus orientalis* hybrids, but botanists now recognise that a number of different *Helleborus* species have contributed to the genetic make up of these plants. The contributing species originate in inland areas of the Mediterranean such as Italy, the Balkans and Turkey.

With their tough underground rhizome, the hybrids are drought tolerant once established. Some additional watering over their first summer in the ground is usually required, but thereafter they tend to be quite drought proof. As well as being very long-lived plants, their glossy evergreen foliage is attractive year round. These are lower clump forming plants, eventually spreading to about 75cm and reaching 45cm in height.

Thanks to the work of plant breeders over many years, these vigorous hybrids are now available in a wonderful range of flower colours and forms. They have the most showy flowers of all hellebores and can now be found in a stunning range of colours from white, through primrose yellow, burgundy to nearly black. Over the past decade an increasing range of double flowered forms have also become available and, with the spots, streaks and blotches characteristic of hellebore flowers, have made for almost infinite variety.



Helleborus x hybridus
'Reverse picotee'



Helleborus x hybridus
'Primrose dark centre'



Helleborus x hybridus
look effective when
backlit by the low
winter sun.



Helleborus x hybridus 'Double purple'



Helleborus x hybridus 'Picotee'



In the wild, helleboros are
often found in or near
deciduous woodland,
where they are shaded
during summer, but have
good light in winter.



Helleborus x hybridus 'Double bicolour'



Helleborus x hybridus 'Primrose yellow'



Mass-planted
Helleborus x hybridus
(below and above left).

Taking care of your hellebores

Maintenance

The annual growth cycle of most hellebores begins in autumn with the onset of cooler weather. The best time to plant, divide or move hellebores is during their period of growth – ideally in late autumn into winter. The growing season lasts until late spring when most hellebores become more or less dormant over summer.

For *Helleborus x hybridus*, remove old foliage down to the ground when the new season's growth can be seen – typically in mid to late autumn – before flowering. This will clean up the plant, help prevent disease and show off the flowers better. For the taller growing species and hybrids, including *Helleborus argutifolius* and *Helleborus foetidus*, the clean up should happen after flowering; remove spent flowering stems to the ground in late winter or early spring.

Feed hellebores with a controlled release fertiliser and give a light top dressing of dolomite in May or June and mulch them in spring.

Climate

Hellebores grow best if they experience some cold in winter. Summer heat is not a problem and, at the other extreme, hellebores are not troubled by frost or snow. Hellebores grow well in all areas of Tasmania and Victoria. The more temperate climate areas around and south of Adelaide and Perth are also suitable for hellebores. They struggle in areas of high humidity; in NSW and Queensland, hellebores are best suited to coastal areas only as far north as Sydney or higher altitude areas inland, which experience lower humidity and colder winters, from around Canberra through to Orange, Armidale and at least as far north as Toowoomba.

Five more favourites

Helleborus x ericsmithii



Helleborus x ballardiae and H. x ericsmithii

Helleborus x ballardiae and *Helleborus x ericsmithii* are stunning hybrids. *Helleborus x ballardiae* crosses the somewhat delicate white-flowered *Helleborus niger* with the very different *Helleborus lividus*. It was first produced in the 1970s by English breeder Helen Ballard. English nurseryman Eric Smith is behind the delightfully named *Helleborus x ericsmithii*, a hybrid of *H. niger* and *H. sternii*.

These two hybrids can be hard to tell apart, having very similar genetic background and showing the variability typical of hellebore hybrids. They have large cream to pinkish flowers above often attractively mottled, leathery foliage. They can be quite strong growers and produce a mass of flowers in winter. Unfortunately, as inter-specific hybrids they are infertile, so don't set seed and can't be propagated in this way. This makes it necessary to propagate these highly desirable hybrids by either the fiddly process of redoing the original cross or by tissue culture. Both of these hybrids make very attractive pot specimens but, like all hellebores, will eventually need quite a large pot (30cm at least) due to their extensive root systems.

Helleborus x ballardiae



Hellebore flowers can look good for weeks as they persist on the plant - and often fade to another colour.



Helleborus x sternii
Ashwood Strain



Helleborus argutifolius



Helleborus foetidus
Red Silver

Helleborus argutifolius

Another hellebore on my favourites list has had a name change of late. Previously known as *Helleborus corsicus* but now more correctly known as *Helleborus argutifolius*, this is a taller growing, more shrub-like plant. As its earlier name implies, this species hails from the island of Corsica in the Mediterranean. Its most distinctive feature is its dramatic spiny margined trifoliate leaves.

Growing up to 90cm tall, this hellebore can make a wonderful bold foliage statement. The flowers of *Helleborus argutifolius* are pale green and born in large clusters atop leafy stems. It is probably the most sun tolerant of the hellebores and a very tough plant.

Helleborus x sternii

Helleborus x sternii is another hybrid – this time between *Helleborus argutifolius* and its close relative *Helleborus lividus*. *H. x sternii* is named after Sir Frederick Stern, who first recorded the hybrid in the 40s. It's a variable hybrid with plants resembling either parent species to differing degrees.

Generally this hybrid will display the influence of *Helleborus lividus* through its colouring with pinkish stems, mottled green to silver foliage and some pinkish shades in flowers. It is usually a more compact plant than *Helleborus argutifolius*, growing to about 50cm. There are a number of different forms of this hybrid available with perhaps the most distinctive being that bred by Ashwood Nursery in the UK, which features stunning silver laced foliage.

Helleborus foetidus

Helleborus foetidus is another of the taller growing, more shrubby species, growing to about 70cm. The leaves of *H. foetidus* are attractively divided and en masse this species can make a telling foliage statement in the winter garden. The flowers of this species are small, bell-shaped and in shades of green, occurring in large clusters on the top of the stems. *Helleborus foetidus*, like all of the taller growing hellebores, are best appreciated as foliage plants, able to add structure and form to the garden year round with the added bonus of their subtle flowers in winter. There are several different forms of this species reflecting variations in foliage and stem colour. 'Red Silver' is a US-bred form with pewter coloured leaves and red edges to the flowers. 'Wester Flisk' is an older UK form with characteristically deep red stems. 'Gold Bullion' has foliage that starts out bright yellow, gradually fading to pale green, and can really lighten up darker spots in the garden.



Spotting is an attractive characteristic of many hellebore flowers.



Helleborus x hybridus 'Black'



Helleborus x hybridus 'Double White Spotted'



Helleborus niger, delicate white parent to the *Helleborus x ballardiae*.



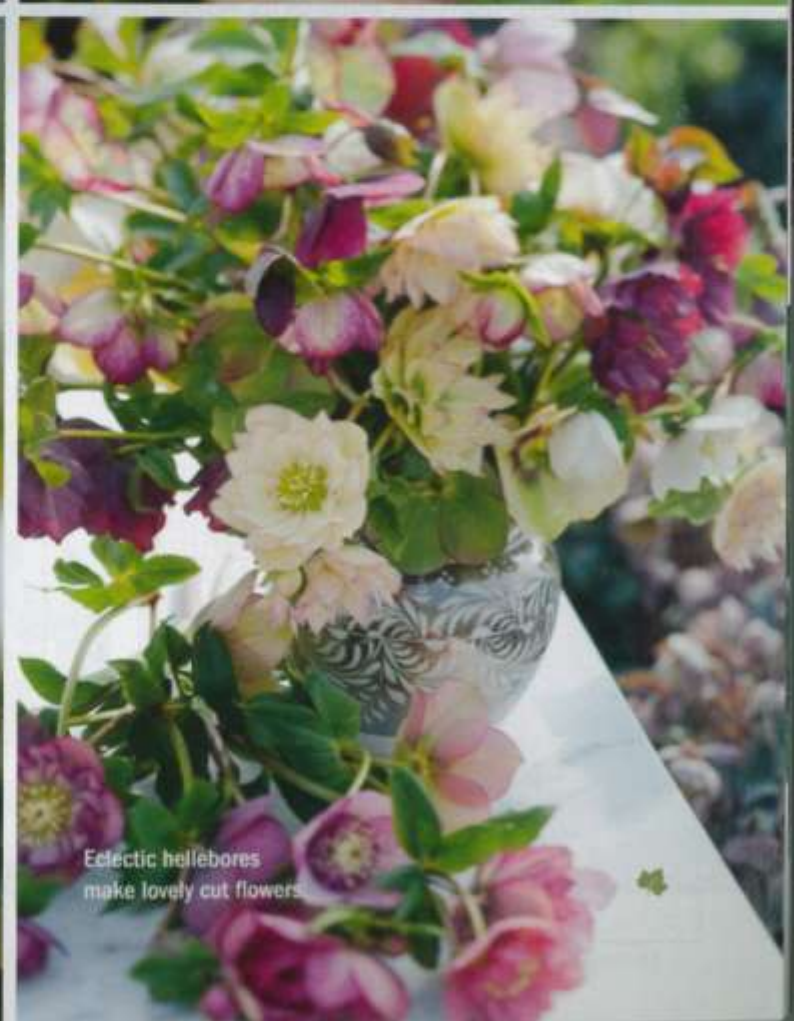
Helleborus x hybridus 'Double Pink'



Helleborus x hybridus 'Pink Spotted'



Helleborus x hybridus 'White'



Ectetic hellebores
make lovely cut flowers.