

The Post Office Farm Nursery guide to growing Hellebores

1. Climate and Position

In terms of climate, anywhere in Victoria and Tasmania is suitable. In NSW, coastal areas up to about Sydney are suitable. Inland higher altitude areas in NSW which experience cold winters, from around Canberra, through Orange and as far north as the Queensland border are well suited to growing Hellebores. The suitable inland climatic range extends into Queensland at least as far as Toowoomba. In South Australia the more temperate climates between Mount Gambier and Adelaide are fine for Hellebores.

Climatically Hellebores will grow best if they experience some cold in winter. Summer heat is not a problem as long as conditions are not too humid and they are in shade. Hellebores are not troubled by frost or snow.

Helleborus x hybridus is the most adaptable of the hellebores in terms of climate. The taller species such as *H. argutifolius*, *H. x sternii* and *H. foetidus* are less tolerant of humidity and so are less suited to more tropical climates.

Hellebores are tolerant of most soil types and soil pH also does not seem to be an issue for them. The main exception is very sandy soils where Hellebores usually struggle.

In the garden Hellebores will grow best if they receive shade for most of the day from the hot summer sun. Growth and flowering will be improved if the plants receive at least some sun in winter, so a position under deciduous trees or where winter sun can reach them is ideal.

Placing Hellebores where they get very little light in winter, for example under evergreen trees/shrubs is the most common mistake people make when positioning Hellebores.

2. Planting

Hellebores have vigorous root systems which need space to grow. Almost all Hellebores you purchase from us will be ready to be either planted out or potted up. Please do not keep your Hellebores long term in the pots you purchased them in – they won't be happy. Plant them out or pot them up as soon as possible to enable them to establish before summer.

They grow best in a rich, well drained soil with plenty of organic matter. Hellebores do not like excessively wet or water-logged conditions. Prepare the ground by digging deeply (to help that big root system get going) and if possible incorporate some organic matter in the form of compost prior to planting. If the roots are looking a bit congested (hard to avoid for us when growing them in pots as they put on so much root growth), then loosen the roots a little prior to planting.

Water the plants in well. Please note that plants may need some additional watering over their first summer in the ground, depending on conditions. We usually find that in subsequent summers, they become quite drought tolerant.

Hellebores are best grown in-ground rather than in pots. Plants in pots will need more water over summer and regular annual feeding (see below). Of the different varieties of Hellebore, *Helleborus x hybridus* do best in pots. However due to their extensive root systems they will require regular

potting on into eventually large tubs (30-40cm diameter). *H. foetidus*, *H. argutifolius* and *H. x sternii* generally will not grow well in pots as larger plants.

Helleborus x hybridus varieties will generally grow to about 45cm tall with a spread of about 60cm and they should be planted about 60cm apart. Taller growing species (*H. argutifolius*, *H. foetidus*) may get up to about 75cm tall and should be planted about 60cm apart.

Hellebores usually need to be 2-3 years old before they will flower. One year old seedlings we sell in tubes (mail order stock) generally will flower in the winter of the year following purchase.

3. Maintenance

Mid to late autumn into early winter (April to June) is the start of the annual growth period for most Hellebores, depending a bit on climate and season. This is the best time to do most of the annual maintenance jobs on your Hellebores: feeding and cleaning up old foliage, moving and dividing if necessary.

By this time of the year the old foliage will be looking a bit tatty and new growth can be seen pushing up from the base of the plant. Once you see that new growth on *Helleborus x hybridus* you can safely cut back old foliage right to the ground, before the plant flowers. This is not essential but does clean up the plant and show off the flowers better.

Late autumn is also the time to feed your Hellebores. Any type of complete fertiliser is suitable – liquid, powder or pellets – as long as it contains the three main nutrient elements (N, P and K). As with other members of the *Ranunculaceae* family (eg. Clematis, Delphiniums) Hellebores will take quite a lot of feeding. A sprinkling of dolomite lime will be appreciated by Hellebores as well (for the calcium and magnesium rather than any effect on soil pH).

If you need to move or divide your Hellebores then late autumn to early winter is also the right time. *Helleborus x hybridus* are deep rooted so be sure to dig quite deeply to avoid chopping off most of the roots. Large clumps of *H. x hybridus* can then be divided with a sharp spade or large knife.

Treatment for the taller growing Hellebore species is a bit different. For these species (*H. argutifolius*, *H. foetidus*, *H. x sternii*) the old flowering stems should be removed in spring, after flowering has finished. Cut the old stems down to the ground. The taller species cannot be divided, but will usually produce lots of seedlings which you can move around during winter.

All Hellebores will appreciate mulching in spring before the heat of summer sets in. Some additional summer watering will usually be necessary until plants become fully established.

Spent flowers can be removed prior to seed dropping in mid-spring if you don't want lots of seedlings popping up the following winter. It is a good idea to thin out/remove such seedlings to prevent plants becoming over crowded.

Watch for aphids as the weather warms up in spring. Use whatever pesticide you prefer, but be prepared for multiple applications.

www.postofficefarmnursery.com.au