

The Post Office Farm Nursery guide to growing Hellebores

1. Position in the garden

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. This positioning under or near to deciduous shade is probably the single most important part of successfully growing Hellebores. 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.

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. Hellebores do require good drainage and do not like water logged conditions.

2. Climate

Hellebores are temperate climate plants, requiring cool to cold Winters to flower. In terms of climate, anywhere in Victoria and Tasmania is suitable. In NSW, coastal areas up to about Newcastle are suitable. Inland higher altitude areas in NSW which experience cold winters, from around Canberra, through Orange, Armidale 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. Hellebores are not suited to semi Tropical areas such as Brisbane. In South Australia the more temperate climates between Mount Gambier and Adelaide are fine for Hellebores.

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.

3. 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.

Please note that due to their vigorous root system and because they are well grown, at certain times of the year plants purchased from us may appear to be 'pot bound'. This is not the case and the plants will not be affected and will grow away perfectly well when planted or potted on.

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.

4. 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.

5. Using Hellebores in the garden

Hellebores, or Winter Roses, are one of the stars of the Winter Garden. When few other garden plants are at their best, Hellebores are in full growth and providing plenty of flower power in the cold Winter months.

The growth cycle of Hellebores is the opposite of many plants. Hellebores kick into growth in Autumn, flower during Winter and put on lots of new leafy growth in late Winter to early Spring. To use Hellebores most effectively in the garden they require some protection from the hot summer sun. The ideal position for Hellebores is planted under or near deciduous trees or shrubs. Ideal canopy trees for Hellebores include Birches, Maples, ornamental pears (Pyrus), Oaks and Planes.

Hellebores look their best when planted en masse rather than as isolated plants. A good sized drift of Hellebores planted as a ground cover under deciduous trees will look wonderful year round. Hellebores lend themselves to an informal planting style, rather than being used as 'straightline' type plants.

When selecting Hellebores a number of different approaches to mixing and matching colours is possible. A mix of paler pastel colours such as pale pink, apricots, primrose yellow and whites always look good in the low light of the winter garden. Alternatively a bolder approach to colours could see a striking mix of purples, burgundies and say yellows to really brighten things up. It all comes down to personal choice. However we would warn against having only very dark colours (purples and blacks and slates) as these are not so effective in the winter garden and the flowers can tend to disappear against the soil. Mix a few darker colours with mostly paler shades and the picture will improve.

Hellebores can be used in association with many other plants. Some typical woodland perennials which enjoy similar growing conditions to Hellebores include Hostas, Epimediums, Dicentras, Brunneras, Primulas, and polygonatum. Smaller late winter and spring flowering bulbs such as Cyclamen coum, Narcissus, Scillas and Galanthus are ideal with Hellebores. Finally there are many shrubs which can be used with Hellebores such as Winter flowering Viburnums, species Camelias, Mahonias, and Hydrangeas.