

It's a Gardener's World!

When is a rose not a rose? When it's a Lenten Rose!

Hybrid hellebores get their common name, **Lenten rose**, from the rose-like flowers that appear in early spring around the Christian observance of Lent.

Hellebore sounds like a dangerous herb, doesn't it? Maybe it's the name, as it's a little too close to "Hell" for some people's comfort. According to some sources, Hellebore was an ingredient in poisons & potions and it has a long association with witches and witchcraft.

Hellebore's name has nothing to do with Hell in reality, but it does have unsavoury connotations. Hellebore is from the Greek Helleborus, and translates literally to "injure food". That's right, hellebore was named after its famous use as a poison! The ancient Greeks knew how to use this plant successfully. In fact, they used it in battle to poison a besieged city's water supply, and in smaller doses to (supposedly) cure madness. Melampodium, an old name for Hellebore, refers to the ancient physician Melampus who used Hellebore to cure the daughters of the king of Argos of the madness of the maenads. Some have speculated the Alexander the Great died of Hellebore poisoning while being treated for an illness.

Since the fall of ancient Greece, this plant has held a shadowy place in the flower world. Full of magic, mystery, darkness, and danger, this flower is a gothic delight. This evergreen, wintertime flower reminds us all too clearly of our own mortality. It thrives in seasons of dying light and cold, frozen soil. Blooming in the shadows, hellebore's lovely flowers draw us into the darkness with it. Let's meet this dark beauty.



The "blooms" (which are actually sepals that protect the true flowers) last for several months, from February until May, and the foliage is evergreen in all but the coldest regions. Cup-shaped flowers (double in some cases) grow directly from upright stems that sprout from a woody base. The flower colours ranges from white to yellow, pink to blackish-purple, often with exquisite internal markings. The leaves are toothed, leathery, often marbled, largely evergreen and held on stiff stems. Hellebores prefer fertile, evenly moist soils in light shade, though they will do well in most soils. Some can be planted in a sunnier spot as long as the soil is not prone to drying out. *Helleborus foetidus* (the stinking hellebore) will grow in deep shade. Hellebores dislike extremes. Very wet or very dry soil is unsuitable; as is a position in full sun where the leaves are likely to get scorched in summer. In particular *Helleborus thibetanus*, *Helleborus lividus* and *Helleborus niger* can be damaged by winter cold or wet.

Did you know?

Though their common name is the Christmas or Lenten rose, as they flower from late winter until spring, hellebores are not related to roses. Superficially, many hellebores look like members of the rose family but they are actually members of the buttercup family. These two families are very similar in appearance but they have an important difference. Most members of the rose family are edible, or at least harmless. Most members of the buttercup family are poisonous, or at least mildly toxic.

Black hellebore (*Helleborus niger*), which is the oldest variety and most steeped in legend, blooms in the winter. In Christian lore, the first Hellebore grew from the spot where the tears of a young girl, who saw the Child Christ, but had no gift to give him. She cried and her tears blossomed into these flowers. Now, the Christmas rose blooms every year in the late winter: a beautiful, snow-bound gift for the new-born Jesus. In fact, this is one of the few sweet legends that surround this plant. There's a kernel of hope at the heart of hellebore's legend: even in its dark history, the legend of the Christe Herbe brings hope.

The Lenten Rose - this distinct and somewhat more deadly variety of hellebore, *Helleborus orientalis*, blooms in late winter. Often, its flowers open at the start of the Lenten seasons, and since those flowers are usually purple and pink, they fit the season perfectly. *Helleborus orientalis* is one of the most toxic varieties of true hellebore, and also one of the most popular in modern gardens.

In the Victorian language of flowers hellebore has an interesting dual meaning. It primarily refers to a scandal, which fits well with the plant's dangerous history and links to both witchcraft and insanity. But, hellebore has another meaning that offers a positive spin on any situation.

Hellebore can mean hope as well. After all, this deadly plant blossoms from beneath the snow. It blooms in dark winter days and reminds us all that spring is on the way. Hope fits the hellebore plant perfectly. Like so many of us, this uniquely beautiful plant has a lot of regrets in its past.

But maybe that's why hellebore continues to have a home in our gardens. We won't be using it to curse our neighbours or poison a town. Instead, we use it to find hope again in the darkness. Watching hellebore blossom in the snow, we feel that within each of us lives an invincible summer ... no matter how hard the world pushes against us, & within us, there's something stronger—something better, pushing right back.