

Way to Grow in Orinda

Add Some Winter Pizzazz – Invite the Helleborus Family to Your Garden

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Every winter, many gardeners, ourselves included, go through “withdrawals” when it becomes too cold and rainy to work outdoors. One thing that always brightens our dreary winter days is the first blooms from our Lenten and Christmas Roses. These winter-blooming perennials are both members of the helleborus family.

For many years, helleborus were considered specialty plants more suited to plant collectors than the average gardener. In recent years, however, plant breeders have worked to develop varieties that have mass-market appeal. In Orinda, one of the most challenging planting niches to fill is flowering plants that will thrive in a shady garden where deer are prevalent. The hellebores fill this niche nicely because they are considered to be mildly poisonous – just poisonous enough to keep deer away, but for those of you with children, don’t rule this plant out. It would take eating a large quantity of its tough, leathery leaves or flowers to harm a human. Another advantage of both of these winter bloomers is that they are drought tolerant and thrive even when neglected. They are, however, sensitive to too much moisture and require a spot that has proficient drainage.

The Lenten Rose (a rose by name only, not a true rose) grows in a bushy clump averaging 2 feet wide by 15 inches tall and is covered in thick, evergreen, hand-shaped leaves. In late winter, its 12- to 18-inch tall blooming spikes emerge from the underground rhizome. As the flower spikes begin to top the leaves (which flatten out in the winter), it branches out, producing clusters of silver-dollar sized flowers. What we refer to as the “flower” on the hellebores are in fact not petals, but a modified calyx or sepals which account for its extended blooming period of three months or longer.

The array of interesting colors of this perennial’s blooms is what captivates plant collectors. Each variety is dramatically different, with basic colors ranging from a dark blue-purple to a deep red-

purple and from pure white, to chartreuse, pink and even yellow. The color patterns on the blooms add another element of fun and whimsy to this winter garden showoff. Breeders continue working to add different colored speckles both to the center and the edge of the flowers while also manipulating the blossom’s shape. Some breeders prefer the cup-shaped flowers, which can grow in either an up-facing position or a more natural downward bell form. The bell-shaped blooms allow you to appreciate the outer petal color rather than that of the inside of the flower. Still other hybrids are grown specifically for their large, flat, open blooms.

In the past few years, growers have start-



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A good choice for winter is the silver-dollar sized Lenten Rose.

ed to name and sell hellebores based on flower color and characteristics. Because this perennial grows with a variety of colors by seed, the grower must either propagate by division from identical plants, or sort by color from a large batch of seedlings when they’ve come into flower.

Here are a few of our favorite helleborus varieties: “Blue Lady” is dark and alluring with an up-facing, cup-shaped flower that boasts smoky plum hues with bluish overtones and bright white central clusters of stamens. Lustrous and dark green, its broad evergreen leaves are divided into seven to nine segments per stem.

“White Lady Spotted” is an elegant plant that will take command of your winter garden. Warmed by a maroon center and distinctively showcased against a dark green, thick-leafed evergreen base, each

beautiful, rounded white blossom appears as if sculpted from snow.

One hellebore we often use in our landscapes is “Ivory Prince.” With its dark, dusky pink buds and outward facing, ivory-petal blooms, this vigorous Lenten Rose is aptly named. Ivory Princes’ exquisite flowers have a subtle infusion of colors, ranging from soft green and antique rose on the inside to an earthy plum hue on the exterior petal. Its sturdy wine-tinted stems and deep green leather-like foliage marked by prominent light green veining and toothed margins allows the shrub to maintain a pleasing evergreen presence in your garden all year. Our favorite planting combinations with Ivory Prince is to add a foreground planting of ajuga “Catlans giant,” or black mondo grass.

Two other members of the helleborus family that deserve a spot in your garden are *H. argutifolius*, the Corsica Hellebore, and *H. foetidus*, the so-called “Stinking Hellebore.” Corsica Hellebore has big racemes of light green, cup-shaped flowers that nod well above its gray-green foliage. The sturdy, trifoliate leaves of this bushy plant have veins of ivory with small serrated edges that turn red with age. A small evergreen shrub, Corsica grows only to an average size of two feet by two feet, and is a late winter bloomer.

We’re also big fans of the *H. foetidus*, the so called “Stinking Hellebore,” because of the dark green finger-shaped leaves that adorn its 18- to 24-inch tall stems. This helleborus makes a great background plant to hostas and ferns in your summer garden. As the perennials of summer go to sleep, the evergreen clumps of *H. foetidus* remain and become the focus of your winter garden. In early winter, its flowering stalks emerge, opening around the first of the year with foot-tall spikes of green, bell-like flowers. These flowers remain attractive until early spring.

In addition to adding some color and interest to your garden in the winter, most varieties of helleborus make a great cut flower at the time of year when your options for an indoor bouquet are limited. Most of the above perennials can be found in local garden centers year round. We recommend that you start shopping for them now, as they’re starting to bloom, so that you can choose the color, shape, and habit of flower that you prefer.

If you have any specific questions about choosing or planting helleborus, email us at office@gardenlightslandscape.com.

You can also find copies of this and previous “Way to Grow in Orinda” articles on our website.