

Helleborus (Lenten Rose)

Botanical Bytes by Bruner
by Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 12-24”
Foliage Width: 12-24”
Flower Height: 12-24”
Foliage Color: Dark Green
Flower Color: Whites, Pinks, Purples
USDA Hardiness: 4-9
Moisture: Average-Moist
Light: Partial Shade – Shade



The Genus Helleborus are native to the British Isles, Europe, Asia, and China. There are 15 members to this wonderful winter blooming perennial family which are part of the larger family Ranunculaceae. Ranunculaceae is the family including Delphinium, Clematis, Hepatica, Anemone, and Aquilegia.

Woodland slopes and open wooded settings are a favorite location for this plant. It is fond of well-drained soils which are rich in humus. A slope is a natural place to enjoy these wonderful plants because it makes the viewing of the nodding flowers easier. Moisture needs are average, but it can tolerate slightly moist soil. Most gardeners consider Lenten Rose a shade plant, although in Northern climates it maybe planted in sunnier locations if moisture and soil type are appropriate..

The care of these plants is fairly simple. Many gardeners will actually remove the old leaves in December or January. This is done to make it easier to view the flowers as well as it helps to prevent the spread of diseases. When dividing Helleborus it is generally best to dig up the whole plant and wash the soil off of the crown. This will allow you to see all of the active buds. Then a sharp sterile knife can be used to cut between the active buds. Always make sure that each new clump has at least 3-4 active buds.

Helleborus are also known as Lenten Rose, Christmas Rose, or Hellebore. Some of these names arose because of the time of year Helleborus blooms. Depending on the climate and species of Helleborus bloom time can be anytime from November thru March.

The name Helleborus has its roots from 2 Greek words; helein which means to injure and bora which means food. This odd combination refers to the extremely bitter tasting roots and leaves of the plant.

The legends and mythology add interesting color to the background of Helleborus. In Greek mythology Dionysus cast a curse of madness upon daughters of King Melampus of Pylos. The King used Hellebore to cure the curse. Also an old legend concerning Helleborus niger (Christmas Rose) states that the Christmas Rose sprouted in the snow from the tears of a young girl who did not have a gift to give Baby Christ in Bethlehem.

Helleborus is a good choice for gardeners whom would enjoy adding a little color to their winter shade gardens. Its easy cultivation allows gardeners of all experience levels to success in their gardens.