



Oregon State University
Extension Service
Marion County

Winter-flowering Hellebores brighten gray days

Neil Bell, Community Horticulturist, Marion and Polk Counties



Helleborus niger. Photo: Neil Bell

Although the days are now pretty short and cold and the holiday season looms, there's still time to think about ways to brighten the days after the New Year with some easy and reliable additions to the garden. Although January and February are two of the coldest months of the year, in the Willamette Valley it's still mild enough that you have plenty of options for including some cheerful color in your garden.

There are many shrubs that bloom in the winter, but even if space is limited, there are perennials and bulbs that flower in January and February before the "traditional" spring-flowering shrubs and bulbs like Forsythia, Flowering Currant and daffodils appear. Because the weather is so cool this time of year, the flowers on these plants tend to be long-lasting.

Among the perennials perhaps the best-known plants these days are Hellebores (*Helleborus* spp.). There are several species and hybrids which originate in Europe, especially southern Europe, which flower over a long period of time in winter. Hellebores are mostly slow-growing but long-lived evergreen plants, which although particularly valuable for semi-shady conditions, are surprisingly adaptable to a range of light conditions, and in some cases will display tolerance to summer drought. These have become increasingly popular in the last few years, as breeding efforts has expanded the range of available flower colors from green and white to include purples and reds, and even near-black.

One of the longest cultivated of the Hellebores is the Christmas Rose (*H. niger*) which as the name suggests is supposed to produce its white flowers at Christmas, although in the Willamette Valley it's more commonly seen blooming

throughout January and February, even into March. Corsican Hellebore (*H. argutifolius*) grows to about 18" tall and 2' across and produces clusters of green flowers above its leathery evergreen leaves in January through February. Stinking Hellebore (*H. foetidus*), is in some ways similar to Corsican Hellebore, in that green flowers are produced over the same long period, but this species has leaves divided into narrow leaflets, giving it a different textural look. Both Corsican and Stinking Hellebore can be grown in full sun or partial shade and exhibit good drought tolerance. Deadheading after bloom improves appearance and prevents seed production, which can be prolific.



Helleborus x hybridus (double form). Photo: Neil Bell

Of them all, probably the best known and the subject of much of the breeding work is the hybrid *H. x hybridus*. This work has resulted in a wide range of available colors and the proliferation of double-flowered forms, making it the most diverse in floral appearance. Cultivation of these is straightforward, and they are best placed in some late afternoon shade, and where they can get some summer rain or irrigation. The foliage tends to be prone to aphids and leaf spots, so for best display of the

flowers, cut off the foliage in early January. The flowers will stand alone and last through early March. They can then also be cut off, unless seedlings are desired, which will otherwise be produced in abundance. But for this small amount of work you will be rewarded with two months of color in the depths of our winter.

Local retail nurseries including Guentners, Terra Gardens, Egan's and others are likely to have these plants for sale.

You can find more information about fall and winter flowering trees and shrubs (but not perennials, yet) in *Trees and Shrubs for Fall and Winter Bloom*, an extension publication (EM 9277) that is available online in the OSU Extension Publications Catalog for free.

<https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/em9277>