

The Christmas rose

Question: I recently read a story from a children's book called the "Legend of the Christmas Rose." What can you tell me about this flower? Is this a plant that can be grown in the Umpqua Valley?

Answer: A well-known English plant, the Christmas rose, (*Helleborus niger*), is a true Christmas flower. Sometimes known as the "Snow Rose" or "Winter Rose," this plant blooms during the depths of winter.

Although the flowers resemble wild roses, the Christmas rose does not belong to the rose family. It is a small perennial herb in the buttercup family (*Ranunculaceae*).

The folk tale portrays that the Christmas rose is of miraculous origin. The legend of the Christmas rose is a charming story of a little shepherd girl named Madelon. As Madelon tended to her sheep on one cold and wintry night, she saw the wise men and shepherds passing by, bearing gifts for baby Jesus.

Madelon saw that one by one, every visitor had

something to give the baby. In addition to gold, frankincense and myrrh, baby Jesus was given all kinds of presents in accordance with the visitor's ability.

Realizing that she had nothing to give, Madelon wept. Then an angel visited her. The angel dusted off the snow from the ground. As Madelon kept crying, her tears turned into this beautiful white flower. The angel told her that the flower represented purity, and it was the greatest gift she could give.

Rejoicing, Madelon presented the flower to baby Jesus, and this flower has been a symbol of Christmas ever since.

Because of this legend, it was long believed that the Christmas rose was a holy flower with mystical powers. It was often planted close to the entrance of a home in the belief that it would prevent evil spirits that might be passing by from entering the house.

Christmas roses are a perennial evergreen plant that grows to a height of approximately



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12 inches. Each flower stalk bears a single 2-4 inch white bloom, often tinged with pink, with bright yellow stamens.

The flowers appear from winter to very early spring and provide interest in the shade garden when other plants are dormant. They also make an excellent cut flower and are attractive when set floating in a bowl of water.

In addition, the Christmas rose plant has attractive shiny, dark green foliage of a leathery texture. This attractive leaf structure is interesting enough to make them a foundation of the shade garden year-round, even when their flowers are gone.

Christmas roses are also deer resistant and somewhat drought tolerant.

You can place this plant in a border,

in patio settings, along walkways or in other protected shady spots like under shade trees or large shrubs. It is an excellent choice for long winter blooming displays, so be sure to place it in a location where it can be enjoyed.

The Christmas rose and other hellebores are native to limestone regions of Europe. They do not survive in acid soils. They grow best in deep, fertile soils that remain moist, but also are well drained.

The soil should be neutral to slightly alkaline, having a pH ranging from 7.0 to 7.4. This means that it usually is necessary to add ground limestone during soil preparation before planting, since most of our native soils tend to be acidic in nature.

When adding lime, also add compost to improve water retention and porosity. Superphosphate or bone meal should also be incorporated into the soil to encourage root formation and flowers.

The Christmas rose prefers a part-shade to shady exposure. Add mulch to keep your plants moist during dry

periods. Also allow for ample air circulation.

The Christmas rose will self-seed easily when planted in small groups or mass planted. It makes an attractive ground cover. Once established, the Christmas rose should be left undisturbed.

Fertilize your plant lightly once or twice a year once established. A Christmas rose planted in suitable growing conditions will thrive for over 50 years.

The Christmas rose is one of the easiest and most rewarding landscape plants to grow. The ability of the Christmas rose to bloom during the darkest months of the year makes it a valuable asset to any garden.

For many ornamental gardeners, winter blooming plants can offer a much needed burst of color in an otherwise barren cool season landscape. Winter blooming types of plants are often hard to come by, especially for those living in regions that experience frequent frosts.

Therefore, plants like the Christmas rose may be a good option.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.

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