

A merry little Christmas rose



Debby Finley

Ask a Master Gardener

Q **uestion:** What is a Christmas rose?

Answer: Among the earliest perennial flowers to bloom in Oregon, well before winter truly ends, hellebore plants bring welcome color with their rose-like blossoms.

They belong to the genus *Helleborus*. Hellebores are not closely related to the rose family (Rosaceae), but are claimed by the family Ranunculaceae, or buttercup family, that includes buttercups, clematis, anemones and delphiniums. Two favorite hellebore hybrids are the Christmas rose and the Lenten rose.

The *Helleborus niger* is commonly called the winter rose, Christmas rose or black rose due to an old legend that it sprouted in the snow from the tears of a young girl who had no gift to give the Christ child in Bethlehem.

The *Helleborus orientalis* is called the Lenten rose because its rose-like flowers appear in the early spring around the Christian observance of Lent.

Hellebores are a beautiful addition to any garden and mix well with hostas as they bloom when the hostas are still winter dormant. Other welcome companion plants are snowdrops, crocus, daffodils, phlox, trillium and bleeding hearts.

Hellebores are sturdy plants that like a shady position in the garden with moist, loamy, well-drained soil with an ideal pH of 7.0-8.0. They thrive when planted under deciduous trees or larger shrubs. They need filtered light and at least partial shade in summer months.

Mound the soil and keep the plant crown slightly above ground to promote drainage and prevent rotting. Fertilization is not necessary if you maintain the loamy soil, amending it each spring with rich organic material.

Hellebores are long-lived; each year increasing in size and producing more flowers. Hellebore foliage is evergreen and forms a low clump with leaves that are lobed and palm-like.

Lenten roses are acaulescent,



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Flower stems shoot up above the foliage but nod under the weight of the flowers, which tend to bloom face down.



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which means each stem rises directly from the rhizomatous root system, to form clumps that may reach 2 feet tall and wide. Flower stems shoot up above the foliage but nod under the weight of the flowers, which tend to bloom face down. Hellebores can be propagated by division, but most varieties will reseed.

Hellebores are not bothered

by many insects, except for aphids, but they are susceptible to common fungal diseases like leaf spot and downy mildew. One quite serious disease, called Black Death, is caused by the *Helleborus* net necrosis virus, transmitted by aphids, resulting in stunted plants and black streaks. If your plant is affected, the only recourse is to remove the plant entirely.



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Like many ornamentals, hellebores are toxic to people and pets. The name is thought to be derived from the Greek words *helein*, meaning kill, and *bora*, meaning food. Hellebore plants contain a toxin called protoanemonin. Greeks and Romans prized hellebores for both poison and medicinal purposes – treating paralysis, gout and other diseases for

centuries before becoming a garden favorite ornamental. The plants are considered deer resistant because of their bitter taste and smart deer are not tempted to eat them.

Do you have a gardening question? Please email the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu.