

'HELLEBORES - WHY I'M INTERESTED AFTER ALL THESE YEARS': A TALK BY JULIAN SUTTON *Karin Proudfoot*

There was a full house for Julian Sutton's talk; those of us who had heard him before knew he would inform and entertain us in equal measure, and we were not disappointed. He started with a survey of the main hellebore species, divided into the caulescent (with flowers and leaves on the same stem, such as *H. foetidus* and *H. argutifolius*), and the acaulescent (flowers and leaves arising on separate stems, such as *H. x hybridus*). *H. foetidus* is probably the only truly native species, with *H. viridis* most likely to have been introduced from Europe many centuries ago. It is very long-lived, although the best-coloured forms are found in the Pyrenees. Other green-flowered species are *H. odoratus* (not scented, despite the name) and *H. bocconei* from Italy; *H. multifidus* subsp. *hercegovinus* from the Balkans (noted for its very finely cut leaves but requires dry, rock garden conditions), and *H. dumetorum*, also from the Balkans, a very beautiful and hardy plant. *H. purpurascens* and *H. torquatus* introduce purple flower-colour, while *H. orientalis*, an evergreen species from the south coast of the Black Sea, is the ancestor of the widely grown *H. x hybridus* forms.

Julian dismissed *H. niger* as impossible to grow well - only one member of the audience put a hand up when he asked if anyone had been able to keep it going in the garden - though 'Blackthorn Hybrid', with pinkish flowers, has a stronger constitution.

H. vesicarius is a stunning plant, starting into growth in September, with deeply cut leaves and flowers similar to those of *H. foetidus*, with a dark band round the edge, followed by dramatic inflated seed pods up to 3 inches long. Sadly for UK gardeners, it is borderline hardy and, as a native of sunny, rocky hillsides on the Turkey/Syria border, requires hot, dry conditions during its summer dormancy. Another beautiful species now becoming more widely available, with large pale pink flowers, is *H. thibetanus*, not from Tibet but from central China. However, it comes with a health warning - Julian described it as 'tricksy' and hard to keep going. Having bought and lost it myself I can only agree with this verdict.

We then had a botanical diversion, as Julian went into detail about hellebore flower structure: what we think of as the petals are in fact enlarged sepals, with the petals reduced to short nectaries surrounding the carpel and stamens. This led to a brief tour of other Ranunculaceae species which share this feature, such as *Anemone coronaria* and *Eranthis hyemalis*. He also mentioned that recent DNA research has shown that hellebores are most closely related to *Adonis* and *Trollius*. As an aside, Julian highly recommended the rarely seen *Trollius buddae* (syn. *T. stenopetalus*) as a good hardy perennial for the garden, with large, thick-textured flowers.



H. 'Briar Rose'

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H. 'Pink Ice'

In the double-flowered hellebores, the nectary petals have become elongated and take on the colour of the sepals, as in the two double forms of *H. torquatus* found by Elizabeth Strangman on a rubbish dump in Montenegro, and named by her 'Dido' and 'Aeneas'. These introduced the 'doubling' gene, and led to the development of the larger double-flowered varieties now often seen for sale, as well as the anemone-centred forms (caused by a different form of this gene).

Julian concluded with a quick canter through the various inter-species hybrids, pointing out that so far these all include *H. niger* as one of the parents. *H. x nigercors* is a hybrid with *H. argutifolius*, which sounds promising but sadly the plants offered for sale are mostly tissue-cultured from a poor specimen. *H. x sahinii* 'Winterbells' is a new cross with *H. foetidus*, but has a weak constitution, summed up in two words - 'it dies'. *H. x ashwoodensis* 'Briar Rose' is a *H. vesicarius* cross, and *H. x belcheri* 'Pink Ice' is a cross with *H. thibetanus*, both from Ashwood Nurseries. Julian recommended the sturdy new hybrids from Rodney Davey: 'Anna's Red', Penny's Pink' and 'Molly's White', though he is frustrated that Rodney refuses to reveal the parentage of these plants!

We then had a brief guide to making our own crosses between varieties of *H. x hybridus*. First, rub the top of a biro (black, so that the pollen shows up) on trousers or a jumper to create static electricity, then use it to gently pick up the pollen from the anthers. Transfer the pollen to the stigma of the chosen flower which, importantly, should be just about to open, its anthers not yet fully developed. Mark this pollinated flower with a piece of wool or string, and sow the seed when ripe.

Finally, Julian suggested that more hybridisation ought to be done with species other than *H. niger*, and this could well produce new and garden-worthy plants. It is these exciting possibilities, and the relative ease with which hellebores can be raised from seed, that perpetuates his interest in the genus.

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