

WINTER HELLEBORES

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Here we are on February 23rd, well over half-way from the solstice to the equinox, and still the sky is brownish grey and the temperature barely above freezing. Particularly after a week in sunny Mallorca, England shows a grim face. True, aconites have come and nearly gone, and snowdrops are everywhere, if late. The Lenten roses (*Helleborus x hybridus*) are reluctant to get going in the cold weather (just as well we are not trying to decorate a celebrity lecture). The plants that have done most to cheer up my winter scene have been different hellebores.

They are those that I grow in pots or tubs on the steps in front of the sun (!) room, a spot sheltered from all but the severest frosts and north winds, though they can also be grown in the open ground. These are hybrids, mostly with the Christmas rose (*H. niger*) in their ancestry. These hybrids have been developed enormously in recent years. They are variable, as the parent species are. We saw some good ones on our annual pilgrimage to Ashwood's Nursery. Selected forms are now grown by micro-propagation, rather than by the seed-breeding programme used by Ashwood's for their colourful Garden Hybrids. Some have originated in Japan.

I have previously mentioned the hybrids that have been known for some time: *H. x sternii* (*H. lividus* x *H. argutifolius*), *H. x nigercors* (*H. niger* x *H. argutifolius*), *H. x ballardiae* (*H. niger* x *H. lividus*) and *H. x ericsmithii* (*H. niger* x *H. sternii*). It is interesting that the names commemorate hellebore pioneers Sir Frederick Stern, Helen Ballard, and Eric Smith. I was lucky enough to meet the last two, many years ago.

Of these my favourite is *H. x ballardiae*, with abundant white flowers, tinged pink on the reverse, that fade after several weeks to an interesting pinkish-buff colour. It also has attractive marbled foliage. *H. x sternii* is extremely variable, and more widely available. Some forms have strongly toothed grey or marbled foliage, though these do not always look as good in the open as they do on the nursery bench. It is worth selecting your own.

Presumably because its parent is so variable, *H. x ericsmithii* is variable too. Many of the new named forms probably belong to this group, though that is not always apparent from the labels. I have a couple of 'traditional' x *ericsmithii*, but some of the new ones are outstanding, especially 'Winter Moonbeam'. It has beautifully marked foliage and flowers a little pinker than *ballardiae*. I also fell for one in a local garden centre called 'Pirouette'.

'Snow White' is a cross between *H. niger* and a white form of *H. orientalis*. It is a little taller than the others, with outward-facing pure white flowers that are pointed at the tips. I have it in the corner of a flower bed near the house, where it has been flowering since January.

A couple of outstanding hellebores have been raised over many years by Rodney Davey in Devon, and now propagated in thousands by micro-techniques in Holland, where contact was made by Ashwood's. There I bought 'Anna's Red', with tall outward-facing deep red flowers and marbled foliage. Apparently, it is the first deep-flowered hellebore of this type. (The full story is told by Anna Pavord, for whom it is named, in an article from The Independent of February 2012: google for 'Rodney Davey hellebores'.) There is also 'Penny's Pink', coloured deep smoky ink and named for Penelope Hobhouse.

It seems certain that these hellebores will become a common sight in the near future, rather as the x *hybridus* forms have done over the last decade or so. They have every virtue: beautiful, long-lasting flowers, decorative evergreen foliage, toughness and durability. And they flower in the darkest of days.

One should never forget those stalwarts *H. foetidus*, of the dark green divided leaves, and *H. argutifolius*, a big plant with jagged-edged, mid-green leaves and bigger flowers. Both thrive with minimal attention and sow themselves enthusiastically. You just move, or remove, those that appear in the wrong place. *H. foetidus*, especially, has been flowering for weeks, even in dark corners.

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