

A VISIT TO HERTFORDSHIRE HELLEBORES

Marion Jay

Walking into Lorna Jones's nursery in Levens Green in February is like entering a horticultural Aladdin's cave. Flowers of red, pink, purple, white and primrose yellow, some spectacularly spotted, some multi-petalled like waterlilies, others demurely pendulous or gregariously flamboyant, fill every space. Hellebores truly gladden the heart in early spring as they unfurl their satiny buds and bring much-needed colour to the garden. They can ignite obsession, too, as Lorna would be the first to admit. Her own interest in hellebores began some 20 years ago when she was given a *Helleborus foetidus* plant from her sister's garden. Reading 'The Gardener's Guide to Hellebores' by Elizabeth Strangman and Graham Rice, her enthusiasm grew and she regularly visited Strangman at Washfield Nurseries in Kent (now closed) to find the best plants. Disappointment with over-hyped commercial varieties led her to start breeding them herself.



Lorna Jones at her nursery at Levens Green in Hertfordshire

Lorna's plants are largely bred from *H. x hybridus* (formerly *H. orientalis*), though she also uses smaller-flowered *H. torquatus* types too. All her plants are raised from seed so each is unique, with its own individual character. She makes around 1,000 plants to sell each year (priced from £9 - £15), and keeps those with the most interesting potential as stock plants for future hybridising.

Stock plants may be chosen for their flower shape (rounded or pointed petals, doubles, anemone or pendulous), colour, petal lining, veining or spotting, size and plant habit. In particular, Lorna chooses plants with exceptional vigour, and this has paid dividends over the years as her current crop of plants patently demonstrates. Her personal preference is for hellebores with traditional nodding heads which invite us to lift the flowers gently to look inside, though she can appreciate the attractions of outward facing flowers. Breeding for upward-facing flowers is to be avoided as they tend to collect moisture in the centre, causing the stamens to form a black, mouldy lump.



Pure white with maroon freckles

Of particular interest to collectors are the anemone-flowered hellebores, in which the nectaries in the centre of the plant are intentionally mutated to become a large attractive ruff around the central boss. Originally produced by crossing single-flowered hellebores with doubles, attempts to breed this flower type yield variable and sometimes disappointing results. Some have irregular, ugly or insubstantial ruffling, or are simply singles or doubles like their parents. Occasionally, however, a



Pink and white picotee
anemone-flowered

superb flower is generated, which makes all the hours of hard work worthwhile; anemone-flowered hellebores are a thing of fascination, a floral work of art which connoisseurs find irresistible.

Many of Lorna's hellebores combine several features in one plant: pink and white picotee petals may occur on a double-flowered variety with huge blooms and a statuesque habit, for example. As I admired a particularly floriferous white double, Lorna explained that she was breeding for more of a 'clawed' shape here, with the petals curving into the centre of the flower. Double-flowered hellebores have one significant disadvantage which is their lack of nectar for pollinators; with the nectaries transformed into petals, the flower produces pollen but no nectar.

Smaller-flowered hellebore varieties are often hybrids of *H. torquatus*, originally found growing wild in the Balkans. This plant, with single purple and green petals and a white collar, was used to produce the very first dark-flowered hybrids with *H. orientalis*. A double-flowered *H. torquatus* named 'Dido' (also found in the wild), although dowdy in colour, became the subject for much hybridising, the progeny's sumptuous flowers bearing little resemblance to those of its parents.

As Lorna and I talked about the hellebores, it became evident that there were quite a number of restrictions involved in the breeding programme. Preferring to use only her own plant material limits the gene pool, and that is compounded by the fact that certain colours may only be crossed with each other; as Lorna explained, trying to hybridise a purple with a yellow results in only muddy shades. Pinks and whites may be crossed with each other, including patterned-petal varieties; yellows may only be crossed with yellows, apricot pinks or whites; reds work with pinks, and slate blue is a genetically recessive colour so may disappear altogether if crossed with a robust purple, for example. Most of the time, parent plants of the same colour are used, in order to produce a more predictable result.

One of the less common hellebore colours available at the nursery is yellow. The quest for a deep, luminous yellow is something which has preoccupied hellebore breeders for some years but genetically the yellows tend towards paler, creamier shades rather than the holy grail of intense rich gold. Personally, I prefer the paler yellows in the garden in spring; they combine well with slate-blue/purple hellebores, purple-flowered *Viola labradorica* and bright blue *Scilla nutans*. Lorna's yellow hellebores have large, clear primrose-coloured flowers and some are beautifully spotted within with delicate purple freckles.

According to Lorna, successful hybridising is simply a matter of timing. On hellebores, the stigma is receptive long before the anthers shed pollen - to encourage cross pollination - so the ideal time to pollinate is just before a bud begins to open. On single-flowered types, this is when a small opening starts to appear at the tip of the petals. This ensures that no insect pollinators will have reached the flower first, and avoids the need to cover the flower with an insect-proof bag as the flower will be



Dusky slate-purple semi-double

fertilised long before the first bee gains access. Pollen can be transferred with a small paintbrush, but this needs to be cleaned in meths if more than one cross is to be carried out.

A piece of soft wool is then tied around the stem for identification, and a record made of the cross. Lorna keeps a book of all the crosses she makes, and when they flower she makes a note of those that are most successful. Seed ripens during May and should be collected just before the pods open, then sown immediately. Hellebore reproductive parts are large and easy to identify, making them the ideal subject for beginners. Seedlings usually take two to three years to flower.

I wondered whether, if she produced an outstanding plant, Lorna might consider using micro-propagation to raise it commercially. She was open to the idea in principal, but explained that dividing hellebores results in loss of vigour so cloning methods may mean these particular plants take a long time to recover from the process, if they ever do. Curiously, mutations can occur during the process of micro-prop, so there is no guarantee that the 'clones' would accurately resemble the original plant in any case. It is obvious, too, that for Lorna the real joy of breeding



Primrose yellow with purple-black centre



Apricot and yellow

hellebores is in the revelation of a bud opening for the first time to reveal a previously unseen combination of characteristics. Anticipating the possibility of something really special, and taking hellebores into new and exciting territory is what her passion is all about.

After years of selective breeding and expertise, Lorna's hybridising produces few mediocre hellebores these days. Those which don't sell are given to charity plant sales, and hardly any end up on the compost heap. Lorna opens the nursery for business on Wednesdays and Saturdays throughout February and March.