

Everybody has heard of the Christmas Rose, *Helleborus niger*; it appears on Christmas cards almost as often as robins or holly. Most gardeners are keen to grow this lovely plant, hoping it performs as its name suggests. It is temptingly offered in full flower at garden centres and even supermarkets, having been grown undercover and very well fed!

People buy it assuming it will grow well in their gardens, but little do they know that they may well be disappointed because it is the most difficult hellebore to grow well. It doesn't always flower for Christmas either. I have grown it in two gardens, but it never flourished or increased in size. My current plant did flower last Christmas, having been mulched in autumn with garden compost. I usually cover it with a clear plastic cloche in bad weather to protect its flowers but being composed of sepals they are quite tough.

I would always want to grow this iconic plant for its uniquely beautiful flowers, but there are easier and more reliable alternatives. Plant breeders have crossed *Helleborus niger* with other species to create hybrids such as *Helleborus nigericors* and *Helleborus ericsmithii* which flower profusely and for a long time. White forms of *Helleborus hybridus* are always obliging but probably not until well into the new year, but winter is a long season!

*Helleborus hybridus* is the winter plant par excellence, willing and reliable in most conditions except the driest soils. Plants are available in a wide variety of forms and colours ranging from white through yellow to pink, maroon, nearly black and green. Some are spotted, some double or anemone centred. You are best to choose them in flower to guarantee the colour and style you want. They may seem quite expensive, but plants take up to three years to flower from seed. If you are not too tidy, seedlings will appear in your garden, you may have a pleasant surprise when they eventually flower.

Among other winter flowering hellebores, don't despise the native *Helleborus foetidus* with its clusters of lime green, sometimes crimson edged flowers above deepest green fingered foliage. It isn't long-lived but does self sow.