

In the garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



Friday, February 24, 2012

Hell's Bells! Hellebores are in bloom!

Quite by chance a week ago, I found myself in a part of the garden seldom visited in winter and came upon hellebores in full flower. Always a delight to see, I was however taken aback because they are at least a month ahead of their usual bloom time in my garden. But here they were clearly having flowered in early to mid-February. I have hellebores in several parts of the property but this particular spot is sheltered and receives a fair amount of light. Given the barely present winter, conditions are ideal for flowering.

I adore hellebores. They are one of the earliest to bloom and those flowers stay on well into the beginning of summer. No kidding. Toss in the fact that they are unfussy, low maintenance, frost resistant, evergreen, tough, low on a deer's list of favorites and just plain captivating, hellebores are winners. Every garden can do well with a few of these plants.

Hellebores come in a range of colors and an ever-growing number of cultivars. There are also many interesting variations in flower and leaf forms. The plants are deep rooted, range from one to three feet in height and are highly adaptable. They grow easily in different environments. If you do however find that your hellebores fail to bloom, try moving them to a different spot. Although often touted as a shade lover, I've found they like a bit of direct sun. Just not in too sunny or hot an area where they might then get fried.

The plants can be propagated by division or from seed. Dividing the plants guarantees identical plants. Seeds may or may not do the same. Variations can occur. I know of several gardeners who sometimes complain that their hellebores self-seed too happily. I however have not had this happen in my garden. I suspect the thick layer of mulch prevents the seeds from making themselves at home.

The strikingly serrated leaves of hellebores can sometimes develop black spot particularly in hot, humid weather. I don't see this to be too much of a problem. The offending leaves can be cut off but do not denude the plant or else it cannot make food for its sustenance. I generally let the leaves remain on the plant till the early spring when the flowers are still in bud. Then I cut back all the old leaves and make room for the new.

Depending on the geographical location and the severity of the winter, hellebores can start blooming anywhere from December to mid-March. Like I said earlier, the blooms continue for a few months! At a time when most parts of the garden are still bare and dull, these pretty flowers bring such cheer to the winter weary heart. Do be sure to add these special plants to your garden this spring.

Hellebores are poisonous and show up in ancient Greek and Roman literature in connection to this property of theirs. In earlier times, They were also associated with witchcraft. The plant is often known as Christmas or Lenten Rose because it is purported to have sprung up in the snow when a young girl shed tears for having no gift for the Christ child. Such legends make the hellebore even more irresistible don't you think?

Shobha, you've persuaded me. Where do you suggest one look for a good selection?

By julie gaughran on 02/24/2012 at 7:41 am

Hi Julie, You won't regret having hellebores in your garden!
Every spring, Rosedale Nurseries has a good selection of hellebores.
I've purchased several and they are all doing well.
The trick is to get there early spring before they sell out. Shobha

By Shobha on 02/25/2012 at 9:32 am

Hi Shoba, I have a crocus in bloom! It's right up against the house & gets morning sun so I guess it's nice & cozy there.

By Pam Rosman on 02/27/2012 at 6:48 am