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HELVE⁺IA

Magazine for Members of the Swiss Society of New Zealand Inc

FLORA IN SWITZERLAND

Christrose, Hellebore

Helleborus niger is commonly called the Christmas rose, due to an old legend that it sprouted in the snow from the tears of a young girl who had no gift to give the Christ child in Bethlehem. The natural range of the genus *Helleborus* is Europe, except the Scandinavian countries.



Helleborus niger

Hellebores are widely grown in gardens for decorative purposes, in former times also for their purported medicinal abilities and uses in witchcraft.

They are particularly valued by gardeners for their winter and early spring flowering period; the plants are surprisingly frost-resistant and many are evergreen.

The most popular hellebores for garden use are undoubtedly some colourful hybrids. They flower in

early spring, around the period of Lent, and are also known as Lenten roses. They are excellent for bringing early colour to shady herbaceous borders and areas between deciduous shrubs and under trees. Hybridising, deliberate and accidental, has vastly improved the colour-range of the flowers, which now extends from slate grey, near-black, deep purple and plum, through rich red and pinks to yellow, white and green.

The flowers have five "petals" (actually sepals or tepals) surrounding a ring of small, cup-like nectaries (petals modified to hold nectar). The sepals do not fall as petals would, but remain on the plant, sometimes for many months.

In the early days of medicine, black hellebore was recognized as medicinal plant. Although it is highly toxic, it is believed to be the hellebore used by Hippocrates as a purgative. It was also used by the ancients to cure paralysis, gout and other diseases, especially insanity. Black hellebore can cause tinnitus, vertigo, stupor, thirst, a feeling of suffocation, swelling of the tongue and throat, and finally collapse and death from cardiac arrest.

In witchcraft it is believed to have ties to summoning demons. In Greek mythology, hellebore was used to save the daughters of a king from a madness that caused them to run naked through the city, crying, weeping, and screaming. During the Siege of Kirrha in 585 BC, hellebore was reportedly used by the Greek besiegers to poison the city's water supply with *Helleborus*: The defenders were subsequently so weakened by diarrhea that they were unable to defend the city from assault.

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