**Helleborus orientalis** J.B.A.P.M. de Lamarck

*(Helleborus antiquorum, Helleborus caucasicus, Helleborus colchicus, Helleborus guttatus, Helleborus kochii, Helleborus olympicus)*

**Lenten Rose**

**Other Common Names:** False Rose, Lenten Helleborus, Oriental Helleborus.

**Family:** *Ranunculaceae*.

**Cold Hardiness:** Lenten Rose is hardy in USDA zones 4 through 8(9), but tends to languish in southern portions of our region and is more vigorous in similar zones in the Southeastern US.

**Foliage:** Evergreen; basal leaves arise from underground stems and are palmately divided into (5) 7 to 9 (11) ovate-elliptic segments; segment tips are acute, margins are usually serrated, and bases are rounded to cuneate; leaves are thickish, new growth is bright green maturing to a rather dark oily green appearance; veins are pinnate within the segments and impressed above.

**Flower:** Flowers arise on scapes from the base of the plant; the five sepals are the showy portion of the flowers; the petals are reduced to nectaries and numerous yellow stamens are present; sepal colors vary from green, white, pink, burgundy, purple, to a dark purple-black; flowers open in late winter to spring; the 2 to 3 diameter flowers are nodding in small one to three flowered cymes per scape and interspersed amongst the leaf stalks.

**Fruit:** Small capsules containing numerous glossy black seeds.

**Stem / Bark:** Stems — below ground, leaves arise from the crown of the plant; Buds — vegetative buds are hidden below ground; flower buds open atop scapes growing from the crown of the plant; Bark — not applicable.

**Habit:** Plants form rounded spreading evergreen mounds, 12 to 18 tall with a spread to about twice the height, and tend to reseed and form colonies; leaves and flowers arise from below ground stems with fleshy roots; the overall texture is medium to medium-coarse.

**Cultural Requirements:** Amenable to sun or shade in northern climates, *Helleborus* require partial to mostly shade conditions in our region, particularly in summer; *Helleborus* are not drought tolerant and plants require a well drained soil high in organic matter and with fairly uniform moisture regimes throughout the year; *Helleborus* often perform better on alkaline soils than those that are acidic; mulch lightly to protect the fleshy root system; many *Helleborus* do not transplant well and should be purchased in containers and placed in a permanent location when planted; dividing is not generally required to maintain healthy plants; a fall to winter clean up of old foliage prior to flowering will help keep plants looking tidy.

**Pathological Problems:** Few serious disease or insect problems occur with most *Helleborus*.

**Ornamental Assets:** Evergreen foliage and off-season winter flowering are this plant’s best assets; *Helleborus* are reportedly resistant to deer browsing.

**Limitations & Liabilities:** While durable and easy-to-grow herbaceous perennials in more mesic gardens, our summer heat and drought are challenge and it may take a few tries to find the right garden location for these plants.

**Landscape Utilization:** Winter to spring color; woodland gardens; naturalizing in northeastern portions of our region; cut flowers, but dispose of the vase water promptly and clean the vase as alkaloids may be absorbed in the water from the cut stems.

**Other Comments:** This is an old fashioned perennial that has enjoyed a revival of sorts; this has coincided with a resurgence of interest by amateur and professional breeders resulting in new cultivars or seed produced strains with a wide range of flower colors; Lenten Roses are a welcome harbingers of spring in colder climates; many species of *Helleborus* contain cardiac glycosides,
potentially fatal poisoms similar to those found in Digitalis spp.; although Helleborus spp. at one time were considered a medicinal plant they should not be consumed in any manner.

**Native Habitat**: Southern Europe and Asia Minor; some species of Helleborus have been reported to occasionally escape cultivation.

**Related Taxa**: Seed propagated cultivars or strains have been selected for darker burgundy, purple, or nearly black flowers, as well as doubles such as the ‘Party Dress’ series; my preference is for the single forms; many forms available in today’s market are of hybrid origin among two or more species, hence Loewer and Mellichamp’s contention that “the plants interbreed like the gods of ancient Greece”; the genus name derives from a region of Southern Europe in which they are native the specific epithet indicates their eastern hemisphere nativity.

**Helleborus foetidus** L.  
**Stinking Hellebore**  
C Also known as Bear’s Foot, Bearsfoot Hellebore, Setterwort, or Stinkwort; Stinking Hellebore earned its common name from the fetid odor of the crushed foliage and this is the derivation of the specific epithet as well; this taller, 1½ to 2 N, growing Helleborus has much softer textured evergreen foliage than the other species covered herein; plants are vigorous growers; the finely divided lighter green lobed foliage is may be borne on above ground stems rather than originating from the underground stems as with H. orientalis and H. niger.

C The flowers are in terminal panicles with showy light green sepals; depending upon the region, flowers are effective from spring to early summer; ‘Wesker Flisk’ is the most frequently encountered cultivar, with a more reddish tinge to the petioles, leaflets, and scapes but otherwise is similar to the species type.

C Growing conditions are similar to that required by other Helleborus spp.; Helleborus foetidus reseeds readily under favorable conditions; this species can be grown in USDA zones 5 to 8(9).

**Helleborus niger** L.  
**Christmas Rose**  
(Helleborus macranthus)

C Christmas Roses are perhaps the prettiest of the Helleborus with a beautiful contrast between the typically white flowers and dark green foliage; in growth habit they are similar to H. orientalis; flowering occurs in late fall to winter and plants can often be found in flower during the holiday season, hence the common name.

C Culture of H. niger can be trickier than that of the other Helleborus discussed herein and this species is not as forgiving of our hot summers; however, once a suitable site has been found, it too will reseed and form colonies in the right setting; Christmas Rose has been grown successfully in USDA zones 3 to 8; the handsome off-season flowering effects make it worth the effort to search for a suitable location in the garden.


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