

Hellebores are great plants for winter containers, flowerbeds, and naturalizing under trees. Their evergreen foliage is attractive year-round, while their flowers provide color in the cool season. With the new hybrids, you can find hellebores in bloom from November to April. Most varieties are hardy in the Seattle area.

LIGHT

Hellebores thrive in partial shade or filtered light. If you wish to plant them in a full-sun location, choose the most sun-tolerant varieties: *Helleborus argutifolius*, *H. foetidus*, or the hybrids 'Walburton's Rosemary' and the Ice N' Roses series.

SOIL AND FERTILIZER

Hellebores like good well-drained soil rich in organic matter. If your soil is sandy, amend your entire bed with compost before planting. It's recommended not to plant hellebores in areas with heavy, poorly drained soil; soggy soil can lead to root or crown rot.

Feed lightly at planting, and then every subsequent year in early spring. Give a light application of a granular rose and flower, or all-purpose plant food.

Hellebores' only other special need is that they like neutral to alkaline soil, while our Northwest soils are naturally acid. Apply garden lime yearly to correct for this, or put a handful of lime chips around each plant as an attractive mulch that will slowly release calcium into your hellebore's root zone. (Note: lime chips also protect hellebores against the fungal disease Botrytis.)

WATERING

Hellebores are naturally woodland plants that do best with adequate moisture. However, once they are established, most varieties can tolerate some drought. Plan to water once a week during our summer dry season to help roots establish for their first year.

PESTS AND PROBLEMS

All parts of the hellebore are toxic to eat, making the plants deer and rabbit resistant. Similarly, slugs and most insects are seldom problems. The most serious fungal disease of hellebores is botrytis, which appears first as water-soaked blotches on stems and leaves, enlarging into dry brown blotches. Fortunately, mulching with lime chips one half inch thick around the base of your plants will prevent spores from splashing up on the foliage and infecting them. Aphids are frequent visitors to hellebores but do no damage. Beneficial predators will take care of them.

PRUNING AND GROOMING

Hellebores do not require regular pruning or plant grooming. You can remove old and damaged leaves as needed in early spring after flowers have formed.

PROPAGATING AND DIVIDING

Hellebores can be divided in the fall. Dig up the entire plant and wash the soil off the roots. Using a sharp knife that has been cleaned with rubbing alcohol, cut the root mass into 2-3 sections. Replant immediately, and monitor watering until the new plants are established.

Happy hellebores will also often self-sow. Offspring may not match all the characteristics of their parent plant. Transplant hellebore seedlings in early spring.

CUT FLOWERS

Hellebores make excellent, long-lasting cut flowers. It's best to cut after the seed pod has formed. Slice the stems with a sharp clean knife, not scissors or pruners, to keep from crushing the stems. Then cut a vertical slice in the base of the stem.

You can also just pluck flowers and float them in a bowl of water.

CONTAINER GROWING

Hellebores do well in containers for a year or two, but they can become root-bound if kept in containers indefinitely. It's best to find a location where they can naturalize. Many people like to put a hellebore in a prominently displayed container for its first season, then transplant it to the garden when it finishes blooming. If you do want to keep your hellebore in a container, choose a large one, and don't combine hellebores with other deep-rooted perennials. Use a well-draining commercial potting soil, and remember that plants in containers will be more vulnerable to cold, drought, and overwatering.

IRRITATING SAP

Warning: not only is hellebore toxic to eat, the sap can be mildly irritating to the skin and eyes. We recommend using gloves when handling your plants, particularly when cutting flowers or dividing them. Wash your hands before resuming other activities.