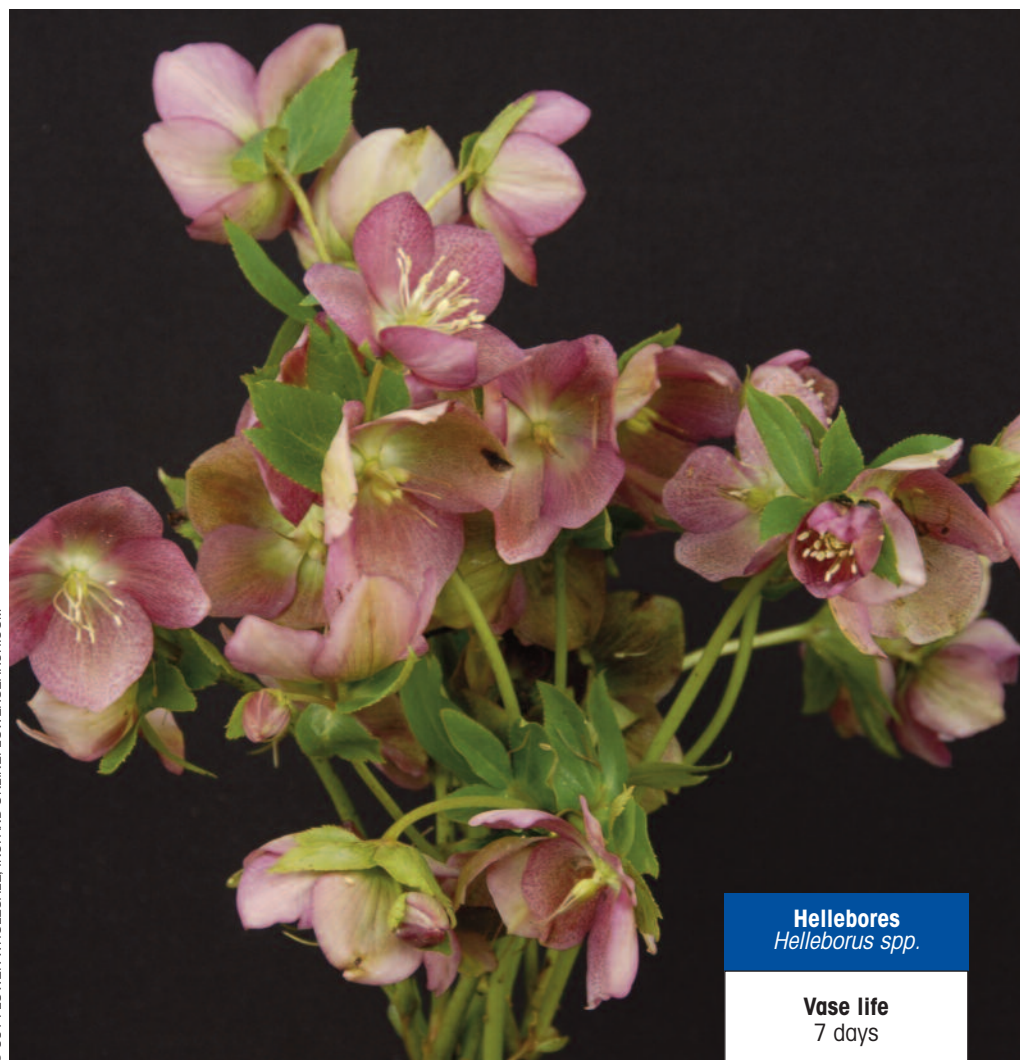


# fresh focus

By Bill McKinley AIFD and Bruce Wright

## High-fashion hellebores seduce with their simplicity.



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*Garden hellebores tend to nod and face downward. Newer varieties, bred for the cut-flower market, are more upward-facing, but in a typical bunch you'll find both tendencies on display.*

tage-garden charm has won over many a flower lover, including brides looking for something traditional, but distinctive. When they face upright, the simple flowers may remind you of large buttercups; both flowers belong to the same family, the Ranunculaceae.

The hellebore is sometimes referred to as the Christmas rose or Lenten rose, names which refer to its natural bloom time, from January through March. Most cut flowers are from field-grown sources and thus are typically available during these months in the Northern Hemisphere, or during the corresponding winter months in the Southern Hemisphere, June through September.

In color, as in form, hellebores are deceptively modest. Often plain white, light green, or a muted rose, the flowers readily cross-pollinate with other species. "If you plant all

white and a neighbor has purple or dark green, they'll easily mix," resulting in exquisite bicolor shadings, says Jerry Bolduan of Green Valley Growers, a boutique flower farm in the

YOU MAY NEVER have seen a hellebore. Nonetheless, when you do, it will seem familiar. The form of the flower is uncomplicated, even primitive in appearance, with, usually, just five petals surrounding a thick cluster of stamens.

Hellebores are not common on the cut-flower market. The plants take a long time to mature before they will produce flowers that can be harvested, which makes the cut flowers more expensive. Old-fashioned garden

hellebores have a downward-facing habit that can make them challenging to use in floral design (newer varieties tend to have more upright-facing flowers). In addition, cut hellebores have a relatively short vase life.

Despite these drawbacks, hellebores are growing in popularity, both as garden and as cut flowers. A Martha Stewart favorite, their cot-

### Hellebores *Helleborus spp.*

**Vase life**  
7 days

**Number per bunch**  
10 stems

**Availability**  
limited year-round,  
peak seasons January-  
March, June-September

rolling hills of wine country in Sonoma County, California ([www.greenvaleygrower.com](http://www.greenvaleygrower.com)). "Our hellebores range from whites and pale pink to magentas, lavenders, and deep purple. Almost all have tiny speckles on the petals; rarely do you get pure color."

## Cutting and care

Jerry cuts hellebores from plants that are more than 100 years old, growing in the environment hellebores love best: moist and partially shaded. As a result, the stems are often three feet tall, compared with a more typical stem length of 10 to 12 inches. "In our climate, they start blooming in January, but we wait until February to harvest, because we want the seedpods to fall off first, so the plants can reseed themselves," he notes.

The boxy seedpods (seen in the photo on the next page) can be attractive, and other growers do cut hellebores while the seedpods are still on the bloom: "We like to wait until at least some of the seedpods have formed, when the flowers have hardened up a little

more," says Mike Limbrick of New Zealand Bloom Ltd. ([www.nzbloom.com](http://www.nzbloom.com)). "However, we don't like to wait too long after that, or the colors can fade."

If you look carefully you may notice at the center of a hellebore flower a ring of tube- or cup-shaped petals surrounding the stamens. These are the flower's real petals; what appear to be its petals are actually the sepals that in other flowers are typically leaf-green and that enclose the bud until it bursts open. (The sepals form the calyx of the flower; the petals, its corolla.) Because they are really modified leaves, sepals tend to last much longer than petals do. And indeed, in the garden, the "petals" of a hellebore (which are really sepals) may last for many months.

Once cut, however, wilt-sensitive hellebores must be handled with special care. At Green Valley Growers, they are cut Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday, placed immediately in water and rushed to the San Francisco market for the next market day. Hellebores from New Zealand are typically shipped in boxes with "modified atmosphere" liners, plasticized bags that absorb ethylene and prevent loss of moisture.

## Hellish or heavenly?

Hellebores have long been associated with witchcraft; they are said to be useful in calling the devil to one's aid. Certainly, many species are known to be poisonous—although, like other poisons, the toxins found in hellebores have also been used as medicine, in judiciously small doses. When the god Dionysus drove the women of ancient Argos mad, causing them to strip off their clothing and run

screaming through the city streets, they were healed with the juice of hellebores (according to legend) by the soothsayer Melampus. Another legend has it that the "Christmas rose" sprang up from the tears of a young girl who wept because she had no gift for the Christ child. So, the reputation of hellebores is, like so much else about them, rife with paradox. Don't eat them or feed them to your pets—but do enjoy their simple and subtle beauty. 🌸



PHOTO BY MARY MCCHESENEY, COURTESY OF JANE BRYANT FLOWERS, NEW ZEALAND

*In the top photo above, you can see the ring of cup-shaped nectaries that are the real petals of hellebores. The outer "petals" are actually sepals, which in most flowers are leaf-green and enclose the bud. This photo shows the popular variety 'Moonshine'. In the lower photo, an example of a hellebore blossom with its seedpods still attached.*

## care tips hellebores

- Select stems in which the flowers are at least half open. If cut too early, flowers tend to have difficulty rehydrating after shipping.
- Using a sharp knife or shears, remove one inch from the stem ends and immediately place in tepid floral food solution. Some sources indicate an increase in vase life if stems are dipped in hot water for a few seconds immediately after cutting, then placed in regular floral food solution.
- Condition at room temperature for 1 to 2 hours, then place in a cooler at 34 to 36 degrees F. Covering the flowers lightly with clear plastic will help to maintain high humidity, but do not seal the plastic as botrytis is likely to occur.
- Protect against contact from the stem sap of hellebores, as its high alkaloid content may cause skin irritations.