

# Stars of wonder

With flowers of purest white, shining through the dark days of winter, Christmas roses have long been desirable but, as **Graham Rice** explains, breeding and propagation advances have broadened their appeal. Photography by Tim Sandall

**AT THEIR BEST**, Christmas roses (*Helleborus niger*) are captivating plants. But they are also among those fabled flowers often more impressive in the catalogue description and the imagination than in the garden. So can they easily be grown well, or are there other similar, but more dependable selections?

Of course, it is the pure white flowers that are such an attraction, especially as they appear in winter (but not always at Christmas). From 4–7.5cm (1½–3in) or more across, they vary from almost circular to more starry in shape. They usually appear singly on strong upright stems, facing outwards, and while they may flower at Christmas in good seasons (see panel, p820), more often flowers open in January. And why is the plant called *H. niger* (*niger* means black) when the flower is white? In fact, the name refers to the colour of the roots; it was applied in 1753, although the plant had previously been long cultivated in the UK even then.

*Helleborus niger* **5** is a hardy evergreen perennial reaching 23–30cm (9–12in) in height. Each leathery leaf is dark, sometimes slightly bluish or more often leaden green, and divided into from seven to nine segments which may be slightly toothed at the tips. Each leaf is carried on a single stalk which arises

## WINTER ROSE

Boxed numbers in the text refer to these hellebore selections

- 1** *Helleborus niger* double-flowered (from Hugh Nunn)
- 2** *H.* 'Snow White'
- 3** *H.* 'Ivory Prince' (syn. 'Walhelivor')
- 4** *H.* 'Briar Rose'
- 5** *H. niger*
- 6** *H.* 'Pirouette'
- 7** *H. x ericsmithii* 'Winter Moonbeam'
- 8** *H.* 'Pink Ice'
- 9** *H.* Walberton's Rosemary ('Walhero')

from the crown. In some plants foliage is held above the flowers, protecting them from the weather but partially hiding them, while in others flowers open above the foliage making them visible but more vulnerable.

Christmas roses are found in the wild in alpine Europe, from Switzerland, Germany and Austria to northern Italy and Croatia growing on open slopes, but mostly in woodland. In Slovenia, populations have been found where flowers change colour once pollinated, turning from white to increasingly intense shades of red, pink or yellow (see *The Garden*, Jan 1996, pp38–39). ▶





**SEEING OUT WINTER** The flowers of *Helleborus niger* often change colour as they age, from white to shades of greenish-pink

**Choice selections**

Until recently, Christmas roses have been difficult to propagate by division in large numbers so the best forms have been developed as ‘seed strains’, the result of hand pollinating selected plants to produce offspring consistent in their features; ‘off’ types are rejected. Large-flowered *H. niger* ‘Potter’s Wheel’ with blooms 10–12cm (4–5in) across and smaller but prolific *H. niger* ‘White Magic’ (flowers 7.5cm/3in across) are well known, but self-set garden plants can be unpredictable. Striking selections, including doubles and maroon-stemmed *H. niger* ‘Louis Cobbett’, have

been split; but plants produce so few divisions that stocks remain scarce.

However, after years of experiment, cultivars are now propagated by tissue culture in the laboratory, resulting in the production of consistently true-to-type plants, and these are now appearing in garden centres. The Helleborus Gold Collection, from Germany, contains eight cultivars developed to flower as early as November. *Helleborus niger* ‘HGC Jacob’, with flowers on reddish stems as early as mid-November, and neat, compact and even earlier-flowering *H. niger* ‘HGC Joshua’ are the first to be available in Britain.

**Popular hybrids**

Christmas rose is unusual among hellebores in that it will hybridize with a number of distantly related species. The most widely grown is probably *H. x nigercors* **12**, a hybrid with tall, green-flowered *H. argutifolius*. The result is a stupendous plant: vigorous, prolific, and with a long season; the flowers are greenish-white to near pure white and often age to peachy shades. They are carried both in clusters, as in *H. argutifolius*, and singly as in *H. niger*. The result is an essential garden plant.

For years these were re-created every season by hand pollination and often sold without a cultivar name. But, now that tissue culture is allowing them to be propagated vegetatively more easily, look out for names such as *H. ‘White Beauty’*, cream flowers fading to green above veined new foliage; *H. x nigercors* ‘HGC Green Corsican’, opening white but changing to green; and *H. x nigercors* ‘Snow Love’ **10** with white flowers that age to green over greyish green leaves.

Christmas rose also hybridizes with *H. x sternii*, itself a hybrid between green-flowered *H. argutifolius* and *H. lividus* with smoky pink flowers. The result is *H. x ericsmithii* **13**, named after plant breeder Eric Smith who first raised this cross. It best combines good flowers with fine foliage. The finest plants have blue-tinted foliage and pink flowers. *Helleborus* ‘Ivory Prince’ (syn. ‘Wallhelivor’) **3** from plant breeder David Tristram, whose father raised *H. niger* ‘Potter’s Wheel’, is outstanding. Also excellent is *H. x ericsmithii* ‘Winter Moonbeam’ **7**, with green-eyed white flowers that turn pink over boldly veined, almost marbled, foliage, while *H. ‘Pirouette’* **6** features rose-pink buds opening to blushed flowers ageing pinkish green.

Occasionally seen is *H. x ballardiae* **11**, a hybrid between *H. niger* and relatively tender *H. lividus*. Less hardy than *H. x ericsmithii*, it is often effective in a container. Combining good foliage with a long season of flowers in pink and white, un-named plants are usually the only ones available but *H. ‘Pink Frost’*, with pink flowers that fade to dark red, should be available soon.

**More surprising hybrids**

In recent years Christmas roses have also been crossed with other hellebores – though not often. Ashwood Nurseries created *H. ‘Briar Rose’* **4**, a hybrid with distinctive *H. vesicarius*. Its white flowers inherit a softened version of the red rim that is a feature of the bell-shaped flower of *H. vesicarius*. Availability is still limited but this is less robust than other hybrids and needs rich, well-drained soil in shelter and shade.

Another plant with an unexpected background is *H. ‘Pink Ice’* **8**, a hybrid between *H. x nigercors* and relatively recently discovered *H. thibetanus*. This too is scarce, and has blushed buds opening to near white, held in loose clusters on deep red stems.

No hybrid has been more desired than the cross between Christmas rose and hybrid Lenten rose, *H. x hybridus*. The idea has been to combine the large, outward-facing flowers of *H. niger* with the robust growth of *H. x hybridus*. (For more on the challenge to create this hybrid see the December 2009 issue of *The Plantsman*, pp212–215: so far only two cultivars have been made available.)

Pure white *H. ‘Snow White’* (syn. ‘Snow Bunting’) **2**, discovered in Japan, has not been sold in Britain. This season, however, a British-bred hybrid is available. *Helleborus* Walberton’s Rosemary (‘Walhero’) **9** was also raised by David Tristram and is a vigorous garden plant. Its foliage combines the look of both parents while its flowers are large and pink. More hybrids of this type will be available in the next few years.

**In the garden**

Many gardeners find Christmas rose (*H. niger*) short lived, not developing into good clumps the way hybrid Lenten roses (*H. x hybridus*) do. Rich, well-drained, neutral or slightly limy soil, not too dry or shallow, in light or part shade is best. I find a few fortnightly doses of balanced liquid feed after flowering helps clumps bulk up.

Shade from a north-facing wall or fence is as good as shade from deciduous trees, and plants often thrive under mature conifers, provided that the branches are high and the soil is not dry.

**WINTER ROSE**

Boxed numbers in the text refer to these hellebore hybrids

- 10** *Helleborus x nigercors* ‘Snow Love’
- 11** *H. x ballardiae*
- 12** *H. x nigercors*
- 13** *H. x ericsmithii*

● Plates compiled with thanks to Ashwood Nurseries, West Midlands, and Long Acre Plants of Somerset

Protect emerging flowers from slugs.

Evergreen shrubs make a good background and provide shelter; daphnes and sarcococcas are ideal. Dwarf bulbs such as scillas, snowdrops and winter aconites are good partners, as are small primulas. Avoid anything vigorous that will bring unwelcome competition.

For a more vigorous and dependable garden plant choose *H. x nigercors* or *H. x ericsmithii*. *Helleborus x nigercors* quickly makes broad, prolific clumps and the flowers usually open white and, as some plants of *H. niger* do, age to pink. The addition of some green in the colouring seems a small price to pay for extra vigour.

This is an exciting time for those of us who love Christmas roses. With selections now being propagated by tissue culture together with new hybrids becoming available, we can all look forward to being able to grow Christmas roses more easily – and perhaps even have them in flower regularly at Christmas. ■

Graham Rice is Editor-in-Chief of the *RHS Encyclopedia of Perennials*

✿ **Hellebore events in 2010**  
● **24 Jan, 10.30am–12.30pm:** Heavenly hellebores, Farmyard Nurseries, Carmarthenshire; 01559 363389; www.farmyardnurseries.co.uk. Owner Richard Bramley will cover how to grow hellebores successfully. Members £7.95. non-members £9.95  
● **20 Feb, 10am–5pm:** Hellebore day, Plant Centre, RHS Garden Rosemoor, Devon. A day of advice by Hugh Nunn of the Harvington Hellebore Collection. Free entry to Plant Centre and Shop

