

When a Rose Is Not a Rose

By Susan Camp

At a recent holiday breakfast, a friend said, “Someone gave me a Christmas rose, only it isn’t a rose, it’s a hellebore.” She is correct. A hellebore is not a member of the rose family; rather, it is a buttercup cousin of the plant family Ranunculaceae. The evergreen *Helleborus niger* is called the Christmas rose because the flower superficially resembles a white rose and its blooming period ranges from December through April. Another species, *Helleborus orientalis*, blooms in February and is called the Lenten rose.

Helleborus niger is native to central and southern Europe, where it thrives in alpine conditions in rocky, alkaline soil. It also grows in open woodlands, shaded by oak, beech, spruce, and birch trees. In North America, the Christmas rose grows well in the mid-Atlantic and upper southern states and in the Pacific Northwest in USDA Hardiness Zones 3 to 8.

The Christmas rose prefers a shady spot in rich, well-drained soil with a pH of 5.5 to 7.0. Since our soil on the Middle Peninsula tends toward the acidic end of the range, you may have to sweeten it a bit with a dose of dolomitic limestone and a light application of a slow-release, organic fertilizer in the spring. All species of hellebore are difficult to establish, but once they get started, they rarely, if ever, need division.

H. niger, so called because of its black roots, grows 12 to 18 inches tall, with a similar sized spread. Each glossy, dark green leaf consists of seven to nine leaflets. The flowers grow singly on short, thick stems that do not rise above the level of the foliage. The actual petals are small and nondescript with the five large, white sepals providing the show. As the bloom ages, the sepals change to pale pink. The Penn State Extension blog post “Hellebores for Christmas”, the University of Vermont article “Hellebore: The Lenten Rose”, and the Missouri Botanical Garden article “*Helleborus niger*” all provide information on growing *H. niger*.

Since *H. niger* is a low-growing plant, it is more visible if grown in a raised bed, along a walkway, or massed on a shady slope as a ground cover. Ferns, hostas, pulmonaria, and other shade-loving plants will complement *H. niger*.

H. niger also is used during the holidays as a potted, indoor plant, which can be a problem if there are young children or pets in the home. All species of *Helleborus* are poisonous if eaten and may cause skin irritation. The plants contain potent chemicals that affect heart rate and rhythm. Other components can cause gastrointestinal upset, eye irritation, and burning and tingling in the mouth. Fortunately, cases of *H. Niger* poisoning are rare. A detailed description of toxicity is found in the Cornell University Department of Animal Science publication “*Helleborus niger* – Christmas Rose”.

H. niger has a long history as a medicinal plant. At various times in history, plant parts have been used to treat mental illness, epilepsy, as an anesthetic, and to purge the body of intestinal parasites. Sadly, the cure sometimes caused more damage than the parasites, resulting in the death of the patient. Hellebore once was believed to confer invisibility on the user if he sprinkled the dried plant on the ground before him as he walked. No need for Harry Potter's Invisibility Cloak!

There are several pretty legends about why H. niger is called the Christmas rose. One myth concerns a poor, young girl named Madelon, who had no gift for the Christ child. Madelon was very sad, and an angel, seeing her weeping, touched the ground, whereupon the Christmas rose appeared as a gift for Madelon to give the baby Jesus.

A little message of hope, perhaps, in these troubled times. Whatever your beliefs, I wish you peace and the joy gained by giving to someone else during this holiday season.

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