

## A Trail of Hellebores

When I pulled the March-April Horticulture Magazine from the mailbox the cover grabbed my attention. Good grief, I thought, right out of the Gloucester Library's great book, "The Layered Garden" by David L. Culp, Timber Press 2012.

The magazine cover pictures a galaxy of hellebore blossoms floating in a blue bowl, well half a blue bowl. In the book the complete bowl spread across two pages showing dozens of the author's famed 'Brandywine Hybrids'. The hellebores are a long time project by the book's author and owner of Brandywine Cottage and one of the major subjects of the book. The Culp garden at Brandywine Cottage is the source of the absorbing and enticing photographs by Rob Cardillo that accompany the text.

This garden in the southeastern corner of Pennsylvania surrounding an old 1790s farm is of modest acreage but every foot of the property is a garden: one is even created in a woodland, another is in the 'ruin' of a collapsed stable. Created from a neglected swathe of poison ivy, multiflora rose, and Japanese honeysuckle, the garden portrayed in the pages of "The Layered Garden" attest to the small miracles attained by brilliant planning and 20 years of hard labor.

The beauty of Brandywine Cottage garden is achieved using minimal water, fertilizer, and pesticides. Reading about it was a treat, a great book that I dutifully if reluctantly returned to the library. I thought the Horticulture magazine would have more information about David Culp's hybrids but the story featured the hellebores in the Yew Dell 60-acre botanical garden. The hellebores pictured with the article were the 'Sunshine Selections' bred by Barry Glick. Yew Dell is a small town near Louisville, Kentucky where the climate is perfect for hellebores. Their collection, probably past mere 'counting', has over 90 different varieties.

This favorite winter blooming ground cover plant has other names. *Helleborus niger* is known as the Christmas Rose, although it doesn't always appear on time. It has flowers that vary from pure white to a greenish white and of course has been parent to innumerable hybrids. *H. x hybridus*, the Lenten Rose, and *H. foetidus*, the stinking rose, and *H. orientalis* are noted for various attributes such as the time of bloom, the size and shape of the foliage, or the angle at which the flower extends from the stem. No longer do the blossoms always hide under the foliage: some of the new hybrids flaunt their ruffled rainbows to court a glance from any casual observer.

At the time hellebores bloom the winter Camellias are also in bloom but one bitter night can leave the camellia shrub hosting wads of browned tissue where rosy flowers once reigned, so it is such a comfort to find the hellebores unscathed. They are in the same family as buttercups, ranunculaceae, and will serve as ground cover plants in shade although they will flower more generously with some sun.

They will die where the winter-wet soil does not drain well and prefer neutral to acidic soil, although among the 15 species some are found to prefer chalky or limestone soils. These plants do not require dividing but if you wish to share them they can be divided in spring or better still in late summer. One expert suggests potting up small divisions and babysitting them for a few weeks before replanting to allow the roots to increase. When the time comes to replant them, do not plant them too deeply, a directive you can apply to any plant needing good drainage.

Hellebores make fine container plants, especially if you have a place where they can be seen at eye level (saves you bending low to admire their inner beauty). Be sure the container drains well and allow the soil to dry between waterings.

**Planet notes:**

According to satellite measurements our mother earth lost 1000 cubic miles of ice. Translation- that amount would cover our lower forty-eight in 18 inches of water.

28 Mar 13