THE STORY OF PLANTS: HELLEBORES

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illustration by Sylvia Portillo

Not that many years ago we were all rushing off to Heronswood for the Hellebore Open. Well, everyone but me. I am not easily smitten, balk at fashions, and have even been called reticent. I was lounging at home yawning "helleboring" to my friends who were crazily obsessed with catching a ferry and the chance of acquiring the newest, the blackest, and thus, the most expensive hellebores possible.

The 20 or so species in the genus *Helleborus*, distributed from Central Europe to Western Asia, are in the Ranunculaceae, or buttercup family. This family contains many garden favorites like clematis, columbine, anemones, and monkshood. It unfortunately also contains many toxic genera, hellebores being one of them. In their long history of cultivation they have only relatively recently emerged from the apothecary garden and into the ornamental garden. The ancient Greeks, who gave the genus its name meaning "food that kills," used the toxic roots of what is thought to be the black hellebore, *H. niger,* to cure mental disorders, especially mania. Millennia later, in 1926, *The Dispensary of the United States of America* declared that the dangerously toxic hellebore "has justly passed out of vogue."

In the mid-1850s the Germans and English began inter-specific hybridizing hellebores. Over the following decades the ease of cross pollination created scores of hellebores difficult to classify. Of these the tough *H.* x *nigercors* and the subtle beauty *H.* x *sternii* have emerged classics. But it is the hybrid Lenten roses, or Orientalis hybrids, *H.* x *hybridus*, which sent the genus on flights of fancy. The wide variety of forms and colors have made them the darlings of the winter garden. From the purest white to sooty black, picoteed and speckled, ruffled and doubled, they nearly rival pansies with their kaleidoscopic range. By the 1990s what had once cured mania was set to create a mania when Heronswood began creating and offering numerous cultivars closer to home.

Yet I remained boringly faithful to one species, the stinking hellebore, *H. foetidus*, which Mr. Hinkley claims as one of his favorites. After seeing large colonies of *Stinkende-niezwurz* (German for stinking hellebore) on the banks of the Rhine blooming among the bronzy leaf litter of beech and oak I was smitten. As the hellebore with the widest and northern most natural distribution it is truly a versatile plant. It can take full sun or full shade and is not too particular about soil, though it has not performed well in our heavy alluvial soils in the Snoqualmie Valley. It will not hybridize with other species and has remained out of breeding programs. Yet many selections have been made from the large wild populations. 'Wester Flisk' with its narrow pewter brushed foliage and reddened stems is as standard as a little black dress. I am letting the screamingly yellow 'Gold Bullion' colonize, my tribute to the Rhineland, in a shady corner of a client's garden.

With Heronswood gone and the hellebore craze ebbing, I have learned to loosen my reticence towards the Orientalis hybrids. I love to plant the iciest whites *en masse,* to create a "snow field." I marched sinuous lines of 'Mardi Gras Maroon Red' through the burnished foliage of red barrenwort, *Epimedium rubrum*, and *Bergenia* 'Winterglut'. And I break my New Year's resolution to stop buying plants each year when the hellebores show up in February; this year it was 'Mellow Yellow'.

Though I may still glibly believe along with Coco Chanel that, "Passion always goes, and boredom stays," I also can't help myself from getting a little excited when the hellebores show up.

Read more of Daniel's thoughts on plants and gardening on his blog www.danielmountgardens.blogspot.com.

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