

Ask A Master Gardener article

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Kitty Barr, Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer

Q: Where can I find Lenten roses? I have looked in all the rose catalogues to no avail. Miriam L.

A: Lenten Roses are not really roses. They are a member of the ranunculus family along with the very familiar clematis and the buttercup. Rather than blooming in the spring and summer, they bloom here in the cold weather from mid-February to mid-April. You will love them and they are not hard to grow. In fact, a friend of mine and huge Lenten Rose lover calls them the “perfect plant”. You can purchase them online, just Google either Lenten Rose or their Latin name, hellebores. They can be found intermittently at your local nurseries and big box stores. They are also sometimes referred to as the Christmas Rose. They are not inexpensive but they are worth every penny because they will NOT die and they make many baby plants from their flower seeds.

My front yard is a testament to that last statement. My mother, not a gardener, planted them in red fill dirt and as usual, did nothing. Now, 30+ years later there are maybe 10 times as many as when she planted them and there are small new plants everywhere. They have tolerated horribly dry summers when no one watered them. They have received no fertilizer, ever. They perk up hopefully after each rain and bloom beautifully and reliably every January with the pink, green, and ruby blooms lasting through March and sometimes into April. Hellebores prove highly durable having thick sturdy leaves and stems and have survived being shipped to out of state friends. Roots wrapped in wet paper towels and enclosed in a plastic bag did the trick.

If you plant them in pretty good soil, and as you can judge from my mother, that can mean just dirt that will grow a tree, you will be successful. An annual dose of regular lawn fertilizer or 10-10-10 will help them get established. They like sun but some afternoon shade is much appreciated. Mine have been mulched with pine straw, not leaves, and the numerous tiny plants that have resulted can be transplanted or allowed to grow where they are. A friend was marveling at the number of “babies” in my yard and lamented that she had none. We deduced that her heavy leaf mulch prevented the tiny plants from getting through to the light in contrast to the tiny spaces between pine needles.

There are several varieties of hellebores, many of which can be grown easily here. The variety hellebores niger is most common and will bloom from December through early spring in Zone 7, which is where we are here in Carrollton. In climates with a later spring they will not bloom as long. They are lovely as a year round ground cover under trees and tall shrubbery. I recently saw them planted in front of shrubs along a garden wall – a charming and graceful way to exhibit their shape and what a surprise to see them blooming in mid-winter.

Another variety, commonly called bear’s foot helleboris or helleboris foetidus is a standout in any garden. Regardless of its unfortunate name it does not stink. I have 15-20 planted by my patio and they are lovely right now with 30” stalks of pale, pale green blooms. The stalk rises 4-5 inches above the main plant and is covered in these bloom clusters. The foliage is breath taking in winter when nothing else is blooming. The leaves are finely and deeply divided in numerous

blades unlike the helleboris niger with its fatter palmate-like leaves. Bear's foot can also be used as a ground cover or to fill a bed due to its evergreen nature. A good dose of sun with afternoon shade suits this variety as well.

Hellebores are found all across Europe and are spreading rapidly in America due to curious gardeners happy to have found the "perfect plant". For more information on all of your horticulture questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Volunteer at the UGA Extension Office at 900 Newnan Road, Carrollton at 770-836-8546 or via email at [ccmg@uga.edu](mailto:ccmg@uga.edu).