

Some hellebores

By R. W. Sidwell

Hellebores have long interested botanists. The flower structure, with its ring of tubular nectaries between sepals and stamens, is unlike anything else except the Winter Aconite which, although of very different general appearance, is in fact related. Gardeners have been less enthusiastic in the past. The dull greenish to purplish flowers did not appeal to those who preferred bright colours. I have frequently referred to the changed tastes which the flower-arranging cult has brought about. Many plants, formerly considered of botanical interest only, are now appreciated by a wider public. Subtleties of form and colouring mean more than solid chunks of scarlet and orange.

We have two native hellebores. *Helleborus foetidus* is occasionally found in Cotswold woodlands and on limestone formations elsewhere. Its dark, almost black green, leaves are unaffected by the most severe winter weather and in January the green flowers with purple edged sepals appear among supporting pale green bracts. They remain attractive for months. The other native species is *H. viridis* which has brighter green flowers, more open and saucer shaped than the previous species. This is even rarer than *H. foetidus* and is not often available in nurseries.

The species most readily obtainable and most frequently seen is *H. orientalis*, the Lenten Rose. There are several related species including *H. olympicum*, *H. atrorubens* and *H. purpurascens*. The first has white flowers and the other two purplish. Hybrids among these, and with the ordinary Lenten Rose, are common in gardens, and correct identification is a job for the specialist.

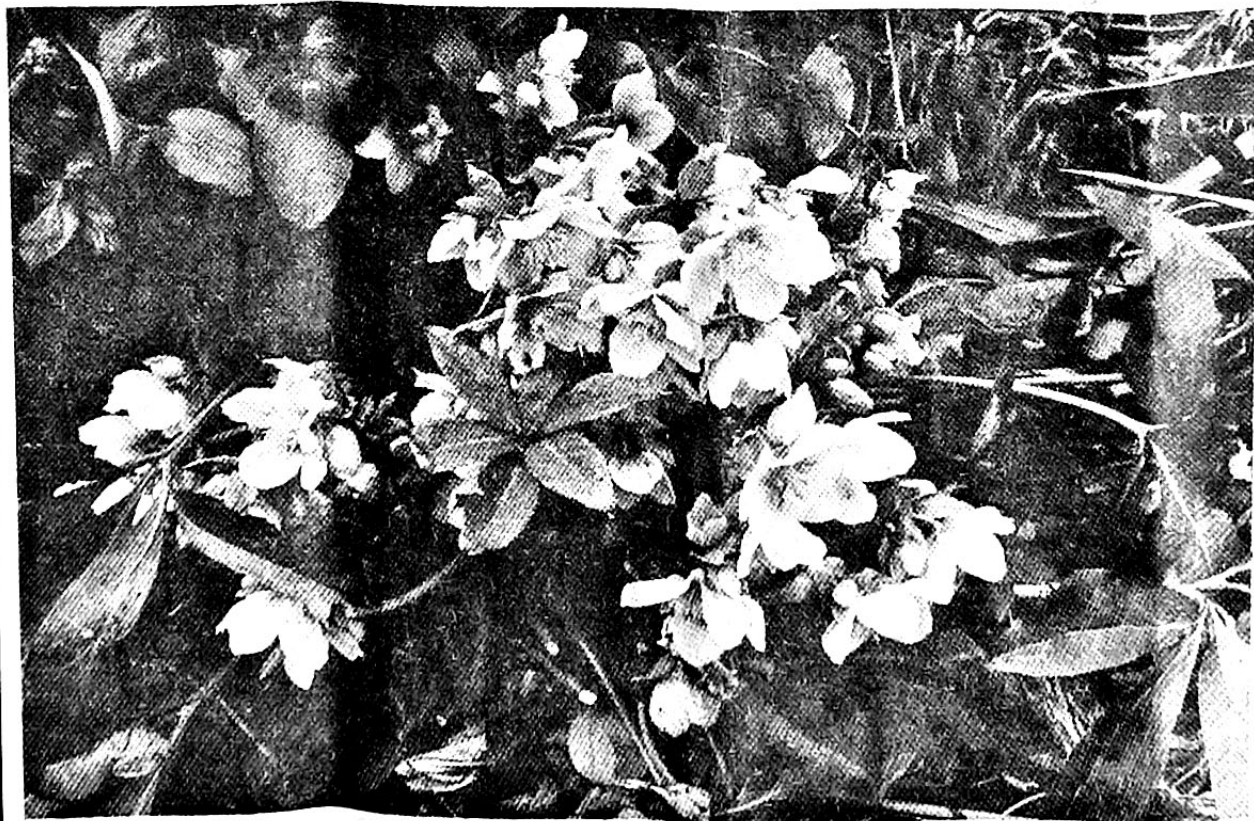
Few plants are better suited to

growing under trees than this group. They revel in light to moderate shade, will tolerate summer drought, and are at their best on heavy soils. Lower lias clay suits them admirably. Once they are happily established they will seed down and colonise readily. If you decide to save seed, sow it at once. It does not enjoy drying out. Seedlings usually flower in their third year and if selections are made from outstanding plants some very good forms may be obtained.

A well known hellebore is *H. niger*, the Christmas Rose. This is not an easy plant to establish and the exquisitely beautiful white flowers are easily damaged by winter weather. This can be overcome to some extent by covering with a sheet of glass, but then there are slugs. Buds with slug holes never open properly. This is, therefore, a plant requiring a little care and attention and not the wild garden plant that the above species are.

A hellebore with beautiful apple green flowers and bold leaves with prickly edges is *H. argutifolius*, formerly known as *H. corsicus*. This makes a coarse sprawling plant but is very effective in the woodland garden. Related to it but much more tender and needing protection is *H. lividus*. This does not have the spiny teeth on the leaf margins but a hybrid between the two *H.x sternianus* has slightly spiny teeth and appears to be fairly hardy, although an old plant here was a casualty of the 1979 winter.

There are a number of other rarer hellebores which are plants for the specialist grower, not that they are necessarily difficult to grow but the subtle differences between species are appreciated only by those engaged in their close study.



Hellebore hybrid