

Lenten Rose - *Helleborus* × *hybridus*: The 2005 perennial plant of the year

Personal Note: All my garden plants are special but there are plants in my garden that are very special and my Lenten roses are among my favorites because they perform when other plants may be taking their winter naps. One memory I have is when I returned home from a three and one half month stay at M. D. Anderson in Houston, Texas during a stem cell transplant. After arriving home, I took a walk through my garden and as I approached the bed where my Lenten roses live, I could see their cheery heads both looking at me as well as some heads bowed as if in reverent prayer. My Lenten roses have bloomed from January to June and they continue to increase in stature and amount. So, you can see why they have a special place in my garden and in my heart.

About the Lenten Rose:

Mature plants form clumps about 18 to 24 inches tall and 24 to 30 inches wide. They have long-lasting blooms and come in many colors and single or double forms. You can expect many flowers per plant in a mature clump.



Flower colors range from pure white to a deep plum, with shades of pink, rose, magenta, cream, pale yellow or green, often showing intricate contrasting spots on the inside of each cup-shaped bloom. There are semi-doubles to doubles and some forms with picotee edging.

Hellebore flowers can last for two months or longer, followed by attractive seedpods. The plants have thick and sturdy leaves, which are divided into seven to nine segments resembling

coarse leathery umbrellas. The foliage adds excellent textural interest to the shade garden, and creates a perfect backdrop for bulbs and other perennials.

Care for the Lenten Rose:

It performs best in our region in partial to full shade, where it provides out-standing color, texture and form preferring an average to rich, well-drained soil with plenty of added compost. These plants are easy to care for. Aside from providing shade and a compost enriched soil, all you need to do is water them through dry summer periods.

Although the foliage is evergreen, winter weather can leave the leaves looking rather



tattered by spring. Your plants will look their best if you prune all of the foliage to the ground in late winter. Use gloves when you do this job, as contact with the leaves can cause mild dermatitis in some people. Fortunately, it is this same characteristic of the leaves that may keep them off the menu of hungry deer.

Choosing cultivars:

Most Lenten roses are commercially propagated from seed. Even specially bred color strains do not come 100% true, so it is best to buy plants in bloom if you are after a specific form or shade. Established clumps will often produce lots of seedlings, which appear in early to mid spring. If you want more plants, move the seedlings to a new location while they are still small; otherwise the developing foliage of your existing plants will smother self-sown seedlings. Your young seedling plants may take two or three years to reach blooming size and may flower in shades that are different from the parent plant, since cross-pollination by insects usually means that each seedling is unique. You can divide mature plants in spring or fall, but they are slow to recover and may take a couple of years to flower well once again.

The Lenten rose is a great hellebore for beginners. The beauty of its flowers, easy-care nature and the fact that it thrives in low light makes this one of the most rewarding shade perennials to grow.

Pictures are from the CD included with the real dirt A Gardening Handbook for Parker County