

*January 2008*

## **CHRISTMAS ROSE (*Helleborus niger*)**

*Helleborus niger*, known as the Christmas rose, is a small perennial herb. It produces two or three beautiful rose-like blossoms above its true stem, which is underground. It's called "black" hellebore because of its black root. The flower is composed of five sepals with five inconspicuous petals in its yellow center. The plant can grow to a height of one foot.

By blooming in the winter, black hellebore has cheered many hearts. Because of its season, it was named Christmas rose. And because of its astonishing ability to defy the cruel elements of winter, it signified to men and women that this herb must have great power. In the Middle Ages, people strewed the flowers on the floors of their homes to drive out evil influences. They blessed their animals with it and used it to ward off the power of witches.

In spite of the above quote from *Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs*, black hellebore poisons rather than heals. Culpeper claims the roots help the "falling-sickness", leprosy, yellow jaundice, gout, sciatica and convulsions. However, it contains poisonous elements which have an effect similar to foxglove; if you happen to take too much, remember that goat's milk is an antidote. Hellebore is used in homeopathic medicine in small doses because the leaves and roots are poisonous if eaten and it can cause dermatitis in some.

In spite of this, the Christmas rose is so delightful as an ornamental that it's well used in shrub borders, foundation plantings and rock gardens—alone or in groups. The herb likes a spot which provides some summer shade and winter sun. You can start the plant from nursery stock or by sowing fresh seeds in early summer. Divide plants in late summer if you must, but they don't like to be disturbed when well established. They can be protected from severe weather with an inch of soil or a covering of pine branches.

Hellebores are native to the southern and central mountainous regions of Europe and naturalized in parts of North America.

*Thanks to Mary Ellen Sronce for this report on Christmas rose. Her sources were Culpeper's Color Herbal edited by David Potterton and Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs by Claire Kowalchik and William Hylton.*