

## What's In, What's Out?

Strange, don't you think, that there are fashions in plants? In past years one of the most sought after species has been the Perennial Plant Association Plant of the Year 2005, the Helleborus. Their popularity is understandable when you note that they bloom in winter when the very sight of those gentle flowers is a delight.

Called Christmas Rose or Lenten rose, they have other, less attractive names. Helleborus foetidus is called bear's foot, dungwort, stinking hellebore and stinkwort. This species has dark green narrowly lance-shaped leaves that have an unpleasant odor when crushed. They also have lovely white or greenish bells with purple edges that are often fragrant. H. orientalis, the Lenten rose is a slightly hairless perennial that produces leathery over-wintering leaves. Their mid-winter to mid-spring flowers, although pendulous like the species, tend to face outward making them more easily seen.

The groups of hellebores have been divided into three for purposes of cultivation according to their best growing habitats. Group one prefers neutral to alkaline soil in dappled shade: group two prefers the same soil but can handle full sun as well as part shade: group three will grow in any soil, prefers it acid in part shade. All groups dislike a bog and bitter winds, and of course abhor a desert. Since Tidewater soil is usually acid to neutral, most kinds do well here although the most success may be attained with those preferring acid soil.

Most cultivars have an assortment of ancestors and thrive in a partly shady place with soil amended with a generous helping of leaf mold or other organic matter. It is a circular conversation when you ask about cultivars as the popularity of the hellebore has led to an increasing number of hybrids or the wealth of hybrids has led to increased demand: a chicken and egg situation. Species and subspecies are native to chalky or limestone soils and often found in high places. With our sea-level success it is a surprise to learn they are an alpine plant!

Lest we think this lovely plant is perfect, we must add that it has 'poisonous properties' particularly among H. argutifolius, H. foetidus and H. orientalis. If you are sensitive to other plants, gloves may be a sensible precaution when handling them. Hellebores may be propagated by seeds gathered as soon as the pods split open in late spring. Seeds should be thinly covered with grit or sand and it is advisable to put them into a pot to keep track of them as they are slow to germinate, waiting until fall or winter. They are also slow to flower. All this explains their relatively high cost. One reason they are worth the money is that if they are tucked into a spot where they are comfortable, they will spread about, making a handsome ground cover, especially effective if planted under deciduous trees which allows some intermingling with early native bulbs. The fall catalog bluestoneperennials.com has new H. 'Ivory Prince' with pale flowers faced in rose and chartreuse opening from burgundy buds.

**From the library:** The book, "Power Trip" by Amanda Little is a journalistic overview of both past history and future possibility of our collective fascination with the processes of power. Little interviews people involved in all sorts of energy fields –coal, nascar, oil, plastics, clean air, dirty water – the lot! Her trip through technologies offers insight into the enormous potential for a clean energy future. However, the US, in contrast to other nations, is stuck with an antiquated

electrical grid and little political will to invest in improving it. It is a happy/sad experience to read of the ingenuity that exists and the inertial that bulwarks the poisonous status quo. Reading 'Power trip' will leave you wondering why the maglev trains of Japan and Shanghai aren't being used along the US eastern corridor. Their average speed is 125 mph but they are capable of doing 350 mph- the speed of a cruising airplane.

A smaller concept is rentable personal city transports, even a coin-operated slot that puts a driver into a minicar for a day. Fun! A country that produced astonishing growth out of Spindletop and Menlo Park can surely solve the problems inherent in its current pattern of misuse and overuse. This book ends with a quotation from Alexis de Tocqueville's "Democracy in America": "The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but in her ability to repair her faults."