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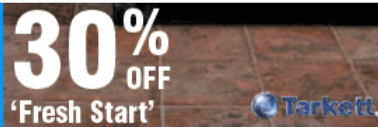
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MAPLE RIDGE NEWS

## Double hellebores in time for winter

By Mike Lascelle - Maple Ridge News

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Although many of us consider hellebores as new or trendy perennials, they have actually been in fashion for several millennia now.

The ancient Romans cultivated them and Greek soldiers used the plant to poison city water during the 585 BC siege of Kirrha.

Alexander the Great reportedly died from a medicinal overdose of Helleborus – and with side effects including vertigo, swelling of the tongue and cardiac arrest – it's no wonder.

Still, monks of the middle ages used Helleborus niger or Christmas rose to treat paralysis and gout, which is why this plant can still be found naturalized around old monasteries across Europe.

At the other end of the spiritual spectrum, witches were believed to use Helleborus during rituals designed to summon demons.

Thankfully, most of us today have little use for this plant's ritual or medicinal qualities.

We prefer instead to enjoy the elegant beauty of this genus, which is why 2010 is going to be such a difficult year for hellebore lovers, because the selection is about to get a whole lot better.

Enter Terra Nova Nurseries' Winter Jewels series, a fabulous selection of double hellebores bred by Marietta O'Byrne of Eugene, Oregon.

The series was first launched in spring 2009 with the introduction of pale yellow double hellebore 'Golden Lotus', which was available locally on a limited basis.

Next year's selections include 'Onyx Odyssey' (dbl. black-purple that doesn't fade to green), 'Amber Gem' (dbl. apricot blushed with red), 'Cotton Candy' (fluffy light pink blooms), 'Sparkling Diamond' (prolific pure white dbl. flowers), 'Peppermint Ice' (dbl. pink picotee with darker edging), 'Berry Swirl' (shades of orchid red), 'Jade Tiger' (dbl. green edged with dark purple), as well as 'Harlequin Gem' and 'Painted Doubles'.

There is even more good news: some of these cultivars are being made available early and can be found at your local garden centre, just in time for Christmas.

Of course, double hellebores have been around for quite some time now, but the cost has been a bit prohibitive.

The other problem was that many of the mixed seed strain doubles such as 'Double Queen' or 'Regal Ruffles' kept us in the dark about actual colour until bloom time, and the flowers were both double and semi-double in form.

That said, the pure white double blooms of 'Mrs. Betty Ranicar' have proved very reliable these past few years, and 'Swirlin' Skirts', with its ruffled burgundy-spotted-white flowers and contrasting yellowish-green stamens is equally attractive, but has been a little hard to find of late.

The other benefit of these double hellebores is that they are derived from one of the easiest to grow hellebore groups, Helleborus x hybridus or Lenten rose.

Originally classified as Helleborus x orientalis, the new name refers to hybrids of all acaulescent (species without true leaves on the flower stalks) species such as orientalis, purpurascens, atrorubens and torquatus, among many others.

This group was the 2005 perennial plant of the year and for good reason: they bloom for months (usually February-May), are deer resistant and are quite happy being left alone for years. In fact, they're being divided too often (if you must, do it in late spring after flowering or early fall, and be prepared to dig deep), as it takes several years for a clump to mature.



Clockwise from left) Amber Gem, Berry Swirl, Sparkling Diamond, Jade Tiger, Onyx Odyssey, Peppermint Ice.

Photos courtesy Terra Nova Nurseries

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Most gardeners prune off all the old leaves in late winter and top-dress annually with rich compost or Sea Soil. Lenten roses perform best with some morning or late afternoon sun, and make an ideal mass planting beneath deciduous trees.

While we're on the subject of hellebores, I should probably leave you with several other exciting new introductions. *Helleborus niger* 'Josef Lemper' features slightly cupped pure white blooms on strong stems, and is reported to be more robust than the species.

'Jacob' is another new Christmas rose cultivar featuring densely packed white flowers (slightly fragrant) on burgundy-tinted stems. *Helleborus x ballardiae* 'Pink Frost' (a *lividus* x *niger* cross) much resembles 'Ivory Prince' except for its pink (fading to burgundy) blossoms and bright red leaf petioles.

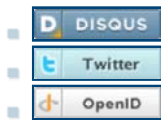
- For more information on growing hellebores, or for a second look at the new Winter Jewels Series, visit [www.hellebores.org](http://www.hellebores.org).

Mike Lascelle is a local nursery manager and gardening author. Email him at [hebe\\_acer@hotmail.com](mailto:hebe_acer@hotmail.com).

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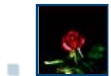


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