

Every plant has its place

Just over the Peak District border into Staffordshire Mike Byford has nurtured the country's top collection of Helleborus – a plant that's achieving newfound popularity

At a time of year when we most appreciate a cheering sign of life and loveliness in our gardens, snowdrops and crocus are probably the first plants to come to mind. However, a growing number of enthusiasts have started to appreciate the attractions of hellebores and have been heading for the Staffordshire moorlands in their hunt for special new varieties.

Mike Byford and his wife Trish live on the outskirts of the village of Kingsley with spectacular views down into the Churnet Valley and across to the Roaches. Mike, a biologist who initially studied for a degree in forestry at Bangor University, began collecting hellebores over 20 years ago. While visiting a National Trust property in the depths of a gloomy winter he noticed a patch of white delicately patterned flowers in woodland and has been hooked ever since. His passion for hellebores has taken him across Europe (although in many places their habitat is under threat, the Balkans and Turkey are amongst the best places to find them growing naturally) and led him to compile one of the best collections of natural species and hybridized plants in the world. He registered as having a national plant collection about five years ago and today receives enquiries for plants from as far afield as the USA and Japan.

Certainly, evidence of his enthusiasm for these elegant yet deceptively tough plants was everywhere to be seen at his Hazles Cross Farm home. Not only was



an impressive poly-tunnel packed with carefully grouped species but there were plants in the 'nursery' greenhouses, the garden, in pots surrounding the front door and they had even invaded the house. Trish told me that during the severe weather before Christmas some precious species were even to be found in their bath.

Given that it takes from three to five years before a plant grown from seed is ready to flower, space is at a premium. Indeed when Mike and his wife moved to the Moorlands six years ago 'countryside, solitude, wildness and space for his collection' were the prime considerations. Although Mike also collects trilliums and woodland anemones – plants that like similar conditions – hellebores are his speciality. He is proud to have produced two new hybrids by crossing *H. thibetanus* with *H. niger* – notoriously difficult to accomplish successfully. A tour round the poly-tunnel revealed that Mike has amassed a splendid collection from what is essentially a restricted palette. There's a huge variety of subtle shades and markings, with flat faced or picotee-edged sepals, doubles, semi-doubles,

inner ruffs, and a range of attractive foliage from variegated to darkest green and bushy to razor thin. Mike is intent on developing even more colours and forms and finer foliage – although patiently nurturing a plant for several years before finding out how successful you've been means that this is a long term aim.

Despite his years studying and breeding hellebores Mike is still 'addicted' and keen to keep improving the species and creating new plants. When asked for his personal favourite, he immediately chose the Chinese *H. thibetanus* and mentioned his keen desire to see them growing in the wild in China – something of which I'm sure this country's great pioneer plant hunters and collectors would have heartily approved.

Hazles Cross Farm Nursery, Hollins Lane, Kingsley, Staffs ST10 2EP (Tel: 01538 752669) is open January to April: Mon, Wed–Fri 10am–3.30pm; also February to March on Saturdays 10am–2pm. It is advisable to phone before visiting.



Helleborus x hybridus apricot double



H x hybridus pink red nectary



H x hybridus primrose picotee double



H x hybridus semi-double white



H x hybridus vein white semi double

Plant Heritage and National Collections

Plant Heritage, formerly The National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens (NCCPG), is a charity founded in 1978 to encourage: the propagation and conservation of cultivated plants in the British Isles; research into their origins, importance and environments; and the education of the public in cultivated plant conservation. Following concern in the horticultural world about a loss of plant variety, it was decided to form National Plant Collections. Botanic gardens, universities and expert amateur and professional horticulturalists all got involved and today there are over 650 national collections. Most of the collections are based around a related group and all are open to the public at some time. Prospective collections are carefully assessed and those existing are monitored to ensure 'collections of excellence'.

For more information see www.nccpg.com or contact Plant Heritage, 12 Home Farm, Loseley Park, Guildford, GU3 1HS
Tel: 01483 447540.

Renishaw Hall

Sunday 27th February, Renishaw Hall, Nr Sheffield S21 3WB, 'Fanfare for Spring'. Explore the gardens and woodland. Five specialist nurseries will also be selling spring flowering plants. Admission £3.50.

Photographs by Mike Byford



The secrets of growing *Helleborus* by Mike Byford

The genus *Helleborus* is an old one and to best understand the ideal growing conditions one needs to look at the native wild species habitats.

Contrary to much popular literature, hellebores are not woodland, moisture loving or shade loving. They will grow in shady moist conditions but this is not their best situation. In the wild hellebores grow in open meadows in full winter sunshine and on high mountain sides and cope with summer dryness and winds by going dormant in many cases. They can be found on the margins of woodland, often forced there as their 'preferred' habitats are ploughed up due to the demands of agriculture.

To get the best out of hybrid hellebores, the ideal conditions are full winter and spring sunshine in a deep well drained soil where moisture is available deep down but the surface is not waterlogged and has good ventilation. If they become shaded in summer – after their flowering season – this is fine, so they can be planted beneath deciduous trees in a woodland setting where they will provide some winter cheer. Choose an open glade inside the wood and you will be rewarded with better flowers.

Ideal soils are loamy with plenty of well composted leaf mould to provide structure and moisture retention. Hellebores will grow in heavy clay soils but some soil improvement is advised to open the structure and improve surface

drainage. Plant hellebores on slopes or in raised gardens to improve drainage and enable better viewing of their nodding flowers. Natural companions for hellebores are crocus, hepaticas, anemone nemorosa, erythroniums and snowdrops. This provides a succession of flowering to extend the late winter joy of the first hellebore flower.

To improve flower colour and intensity, it is advisable to feed during early spring with a balanced fertiliser. *Helleborus niger* may appreciate a little lime or calcium supplement to green the leaves. If you like naturalistic

planting consider some of the species hellebores for your garden, they usually have smaller more subtle flowers but a charm of their own. *Helleborus torquatus*, *H. atrorubens* and *H. thibetanus* are great garden plants.

Hellebores are long lived and easy to grow in most environments, just prepare the soil and ensure they will not be waterlogged and then let them do their own thing. In Derbyshire, planting on south-facing hedgerows with their sloping sides facing the sun is a great way to grow them.

