

# Blooming Winter wonder

Staffordshire Life features writer **KAREN COX** speaks to Mike Byford whose passion is the Hellebore plant, a species he displays in all it's variety in the national collection of Hellebores he owns and maintains in Staffordshire

Photography: SHARON LOWE

**D**URING the dull grey winter months our gardens and open spaces can often look more than a little bare and unappealing.

However one of the plants which blooms during this time is the Hellebore, a plant which has proved to be an enduring passion for one Staffordshire man.

With shades ranging from delicate pale pink and white through to a gorgeous deep pink with red veins, these beautiful splashes of colour can really lift the spirits, which is what first captivated graduate biologist Mike Byford Bsc. M.Med.Sci, more than 20 years ago.

With a keen interest in all forms of the natural world throughout his life, Mike worked first in industry and later as a teacher of biology and chemistry, but it was a chance encounter with a Hellebore one winter's day that sparked his particular passion (although he admits some would say obsession) with the species of plant.

As he suffered slightly from seasonal affective disorder (SAD), Mike had always hated the winter months and was visiting a National Trust hall when he spotted some Hellebores in the frost and thought 'my God there's something flowering this time of year'.

He found a book by Elizabeth Strangman, a pioneer of Hellebore breeding, met with her, saw her plants and the rest he says is history.

Mike has now collected and studied Hellebores for more than 20 years and owns and maintains the national collection of Hellebore species just outside of Kingsley in the Staffordshire Moorlands, which is currently open to visitors.

The name national collection is a registered name belonging to the National Council for the Protection of Plants and Gardens, also known as Plant Heritage, whose mission is to conserve, grow, propagate, document and make available the amazing resource of garden plants that exist in the UK.

"After seeing the Hellebore for the first time I spent hundreds of pounds on buying plants and so began 20 years of pollination crossing, selecting and re-crossing to produce new strains," said Mike.

"I have also been fortunate enough to meet with many of the leading experts on Hellebores, including Will McLewin and Matthias Thomsen.

"With their help and by studying hellebores in their native countries in and around the Balkans I have built up a collection of all known Hellebore species and a wide knowledge of their habitats and cultivation."

Mike has also used his knowledge of genetics and plant breeding to develop a range of garden hybrids to rival any in



Mike Byford

the world, called Hazles Cross Farm hybrids.

"As the passion grew the interest extended to wild plants first used by the Victorian hybridisers to produce the small range available at the time for use in the garden. It became clear that the wild species were as beautiful if not, dare one say, even more beautiful than many of the hybrids and I decided to start collecting them too," he said.

By visiting their native habitats and experimenting back at his nursery, Mike was able to develop a better understanding of their ideal cultivation requirements, which he says are not the same as those espoused in many gardening books.

"Having fallen for their delicate charms and subtle beauty of the species, I decided to try breeding garden hybrids which incorporated the beauty of the species but had larger and tougher flowers to suit gardener's demands.

"Many species have exquisite foliage and another theme has been to breed hybrids with some of the foliage forms seen in the wild," adds Mike.

He explains many of the modern hybrids derive from Helleborus orientalis often called the Lenten rose - a native of several Russian states and neighbours together with Turkey.

"Early Victorians both here and in Germany began plant

hunting and hybridising and soon found some of the other species including *H. torquatus* and *atrorubens*, which have red/pink forms, some heavily spotted, also a few very dark purple forms almost black in colour. These were added to the "mixing pot" and the garden hybrids began.

"They then fell out of fashion as did so many of the Victorian favourites and little was done on garden hybridisation and even less on studying the wild species. In the UK only Strangman and Ballard did significant breeding of new hybrids and many of the older ones, sadly, were lost to cultivation."

It is possible that some of these still exist in corners of gardens long forgotten, as Hellebores are very hardy and Mike would love to hear from any one who thinks they may have some of the early hybrids.

He adds: "In recent years the genus has become fashionable again and is used by many gardening magazines as a mainstay for their winter issues as little other than early snowdrops show their flowers in deepest winter.

"In the wild they would actually flower later, in March to June, but in our more temperate climes they usually flower from December to May.

"The newer hybrids include yellows, reds, blacks and slate grey with a wide range of spots and stripes to brighten the slumbering garden and warm the heart of the hibernating gardener.

"Occasionally wild double flowered forms of several species are found and these have been used to develop the double and semi-double 'anemone centred' forms that have begun to reach the gardens of the UK over recent years.

"Their flowers are full and can have as many as 30 or so 'petals' as opposed to the five of the single form."

Mike has also worked on developing doubles with larger flatter out-facing flowers as many of the early plants had very fine petals and nodding heads, although the range of colours and patterns has been slower to develop and refine.

"The semi-double is in my opinion perhaps the most attractive form, with an inner Tudor ruff of small petals surrounded by the large outer ones. They resemble the forms of some anemones and have been sold as 'anemone centred' forms.

"There is great scope for fun here as the outer and inner petals can have different colours and patterns. It is still very early days in this project."

However he adds in order to breed good hybrids a good



range of parent plants are needed, along with an eye for colour, a good imagination, a lot of luck, many years of back-breaking work and patience, as it takes three to four years from pollinating a plant to seeing the flowers of the new offspring.

"Many tens or hundreds of seeds of each cross are planted and only a few survive to maturity, and of these even fewer produce results that are worth developing further."

To see for yourself Mike's range of Hellebores, The National Collection is housed in a large polytunnel at Hazles Cross Farm, Hollins Lane, Kingsley, in Staffordshire.

Here the plants are pot grown and on benches at eye level for easy viewing.

Being under cover it is viewable in all weathers and comprises between three and four hundred on display at any one time, including examples of all known species of Hellebore, some as yet un-named species and several hundred X hybridus garden hybrids in all forms and colours.

Plants are available to buy and there is a poster display giving information about the plants and their habitats, but Mike is also there to answer questions, and if not too busy, to give a tour if visitors are interested. Larger parties can also be accommodated by appointment

Entrance is £3, which contributes towards the upkeep of the collection and tunnel.

The collection is open during February, March and early April on Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays between 10am and 3:30pm.

**For more information or to check best times for viewing contact Mike on 01538 752669.**



The Blotchwhite species of Hellebore



The Picotee Double Hellebore



The Purple Double Hellebore



The Spotted Yellow Hybrid Hellebore



The Semi-double Hellebore