

The Archibald Archive – Genus Guides

HELLEBORUS

We list a wide range of Helleborus seed, both from the garden hybrids and from the wild species of this small genus in Ranunculaceae with about 15 species, mainly in S Europe and the Caucasus. All seed we list is collected in the current year. As Helleborus species of Section Helleborastrum cross indiscriminately in cultivation, open-pollinated garden seed of these is useless. Authentic material from wild colonies is essential if the genuine species is to be grown. Failing this, hand-pollinated seed from segregated cultivated plants of known wild origin is a second best. We usually offer wild-collected seed, largely through the efforts of Will McLewin, who not only regularly collects in southern Europe himself but also arranges collections by local botanists in Croatia, Montenegro, Russia, Georgia & Ukraine.

We have been involved with raising garden hybrid hellebores for many years and list an extensive range of seeds from *H. x hybridus*, often referred to as *H. orientalis* hybrids, though additional species are involved. Representative material from other breeders, such as Helen Ballard, John Massey, Will McLewin and Liz Strangman has been added. We primarily seek vigorous clones, which grow well and look good in the open garden. Brian Mathew's assessment of our named clones is that "quite a number...are holding their position as some of the finest cultivars ever raised." As with all open-pollinated hybrid hellebore seed, there is no assurance that this will produce anything remotely resembling the parents but there is a reasonable chance some seedlings will be close to or better than the parents. The descriptions of hybrid clones apply to the seed-parent, not necessarily to what you might expect from the seedlings.

The current year's seed should be sown in summer as soon after harvest as possible, placed outside at normal outdoor temperatures and kept moist. Seed sown late, after the weather has cooled down in autumn, may not germinate until the following winter. Soaking seed in hot, not boiling, water and leaving it at room temperature for a day before sowing may help germination the first winter. Hellebore seed germinates at low-temperatures. Keeping seed warm after sowing will inhibit germination. Many of the wild hellebores are plants of continental climates, used to snow-cover in winter & dry conditions in summer. Consequently, they are not always so easy in wet, temperate climates, such as that of Britain. Choose a well-drained site for the central & E European ones. The garden hybrids, influenced by *H. orientalis* from the moister, Black Sea area, are much more accommodating.

Nomenclature: Jim and Jenny Archibald follow the standard work, 'Hellebores' by Brian Mathew (1989), but it must be appreciated that the names in this are only a

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reasoned compromise. The species of Section Helleborastrum seldom comply with the main diagnostic criteria used to divide them into the artificial concept of 'species'. Flower colour, free or joined carpels, overwintering leaves and especially leaf characteristics are not consistent features. Most colonies are extremely variable and there is a great deal of intergradation. Such problems are being considered in an ongoing series of articles by Brian Mathew & Will McLewin in 'The New Plantsman'.

Further information: 'Hellebores' by Brian Mathew (1989). 'The Gardener's Guide to Growing Hellebores' edited by Graham Rice and Elizabeth Strangman (1993) includes a chapter by Jim Archibald on hybrid hellebores and ones on the species by Will McLewin and Brian Mathew. As this genus is currently fashionable, there are several other less significant books on hellebores.