

The Gardener's
Guide to Growing
HELLEBORES



Graham Rice &
Elizabeth Strangman

PEOPLE AND THEIR PLANTS

We are delighted to be able to include here (in alphabetical order) contributions from a number of eminent hellebore growers which give an insight into their enthusiasm for the plants as well as outlining their views on vari-

ous aspects of hellebore botany or cultivation. We are most grateful for their co-operation. We also include here a summary of the work of Margery Fish, whose garden at East Lambrook Manor is an inspiration to so many gardeners.



HELLEBORES AT BUCKSHAW, 1964–83

by Jim Archibald

Among the first plants which Eric Smith moved to Buckshaw Gardens in Dorset during the autumn of 1964 were his hybrids between *Helleborus torquatus* and *H. orientalis*. For some years Eric had worked as propagator in the herbaceous plant department of Hillier & Sons. In the walled garden under his charge grew a purple hellebore, impositively labelled '*H. colchicus superbus*' but undistinguished except for its bronze-coloured nectaries. This feature was sufficiently distinct to move Eric to cycle home one winter evening in the late 1950s with some flowers with which to pollinate the plant of the dark Ingwersen *H. torquatus* which he grew in the family garden in Archer's Road, Southampton. From the dozen or so seedlings, Eric gave five clonal names. 'Ariel' and 'Miranda' have rather similar, red-purple exteriors to their characteristic cup-shaped flowers but are quite different inside – the former with bronze nectaries, the latter with yellow-green ones. 'Oberon' gives a slaty, lavender-purple impression and 'Neptune', an exceptionally slow-

growing clone, is the closest to the seed-parent in its very dark flowers. 'Pluto', however, adapted well to vegetative propagation and proved by far the best garden plant. While less cup-shaped than the others, the flowers, dull purple outside and pale green inside, retain the rich-brown nectaries.

The other hybrids to which Eric had given cultivar names at that time were few. 'Mercury' was his best white – a good, if not outstanding, plant without much trace of green in the flowers. Neat little 'Venus' looked like a cross between *H. viridis* subsp. *occidentalis* and *H. orientalis* subsp. *guttatus*. Eric's reds had started with 'Mars', which he later decided was rivalled by another, for which the appropriate name 'Antares' existed and was used. An even later seedling was named 'Red Star', but I am afraid that I found them all unsatisfactory plants in everything except their colour. None was a good grower and all possessed spidery flowers. I have not retained any of them. On the other hand, 'Sirius' was outstanding among these early selec-



tions and remains a first-class plant today. Its very large, outward-facing, pale primrose flowers, surrounded by a ruff of bright green, cauline leaves, and its vigorous and floriferous character, make it a much more desirable and satisfactory garden-plant than what we grew at the time as "*H. kochii*", and has subsequently been called 'Bowles' Yellow' by Graham Stuart Thomas. This may have been an influence on 'Sirius' but I suspect that most of its characteristics were derived from another plant we grew under the name 'Brünhilde'. At that time, Eric had brought together a collection of hellebores under a wide range of cultivar names from a variety of sources.

Eric had retained a gauche boyishness into his later years and was nurtured by a coterie of elderly lady gardeners of the period: regal Margery Fish, extrovert Nancy Lindsay, discriminating Amy Doncaster and the superficially sinister Rita Maxted. Mrs Maxted, who always dressed in black and had one hooded eye, which belied the twinkle in the better one, had, in particular, taken Eric under her wing. A certain internecine animosity pervaded the relationship of these ladies, often manifesting itself in discussions as to which of them possessed 'the true' whatever-it-might-be. Inevitably, Eric found himself drawn into such matters. 'Mrs Maxted says that her 'Ballard's Black' is better than mine,' he told me once. 'I really can't see how she can say that.' The possible element of truth in her statement was made apparent some years later, when Percy Picton visited us at hellebore-time. He was a delightful man, surely one of the great plantsmen of this century, who took a great joy in his work. One particular pleasure, he told us, was to go over the beds of hellebore seedlings flowering for the first time and say, 'There's a 'Ballard's Black', and there's a 'White Ladies', and so on. I recount such a conversation not to denigrate the great mid-century gardeners but to emphasise that their concept of how a cultivar name should be applied might have differed from the current one. I have stood next to Margery Fish as she extracted a self-sown seedling at the base of a clump, while she said, 'I must give you my

'Greenland'. Of course, as this has not flowered, we don't know whether it will be 'Greenland' or not but it usually comes true.'

Doubtless I shall not ingratiate myself to those who seek to collect plants as if they were pieces of antique furniture when I write that, after clinging to token stocks under these old cultivar names for some years, I discarded the lot. Out went 'Apotheker Bogren', 'Coombe Fishacre Purple' and 'Apple Blossom' from Margery Fish. Out went 'Prince Rupert', 'Petsamo' and 'Albion Otto', which had been acquired from the old Perry nursery at Enfield. Out went 'Ballard's Black' and 'Black Knight'. None of the plants we had under these names was anything but mediocre. I might just have kept 'Black Knight' had not his child, 'Andromeda', been superior in vigour and beauty, but even then I am aware that many, more darkly beautiful than she is, may have been produced by those raising seedlings at present. The one old name which is still with me is cream 'Brünhilde'. She may not be very special but she is a remarkably vigorous lady for her age.

Between 1967 and 1975, when Eric and I ran the retail nursery The Plantsmen together, there was an unprecedented opportunity for Eric to grow thousands of hellebore seedlings through to flowering. Unlike the hostas, where beds of dreary, unrequired, green-leaved seedlings gave me a constant problem of disposal – Eric could never countenance discarding any of his children on the rubbish heap – hellebores could easily be sorted into colours and sold as 'strains', which I have always felt could provide a more vigorous plant than divisions from a named clone, in any case. A great deal of discussion between us went into which seedlings should be retained and, in due course, these would acquire names and be propagated vegetatively. Considering the volume of seedlings raised, I am glad to say the names were not too prolific. 'Castor' and 'Pollux' were two very dark twins, which were both kept as Eric could not decide which he preferred. A subsequent seedling which I named 'Corvus' was along the same lines and better than either. 'Pleiades' and 'Hyades' had close



affinities to *H. orientalis* subsp. *guttatus*. The former was a dwarf, neat plant with tidily crimson-speckled white cups, and the latter a tall, robust greenish-white heavily spotted with dull crimson, which unfortunately did not maintain its initial vigour after years of division. Two fine whites were named 'Polaris' and 'Virgo', and two dimly coloured, greenish, creamy pinks, 'Cassiopeia' and 'Alcyone', having been selected by Amy Doncaster on two of her annual visits, were dutifully retained. Her taste always inclined to the subtle and was definitely esoteric. It was the spotted and speckled forms, however, which were Eric's triumph. These were graded into 'strains' according to the ground colour and pattern of spotting: 'Midnight Sky Strain', from which no particular clone was named; 'Galaxy Strain', which doubtless was responsible for the remarkable 'Cosmos', with white bowls flushed with pink and evenly spotted all over with bright crimson; 'Constellation Strain', which yielded the stout 'Hercules', rose, speckled all over with purple; 'Zodiac Strain', pinks with a clearly defined zone of spotting, which produced some splendid plants. Eric selected 'Aries', 'Leo', 'Capricornus', 'Scorpio', 'Libra', 'Gemini', 'Taurus' and 'Aquarius' – definitely too many.

Although Eric's hybridizing was an active process and he would be very busy on a sunny day in early spring, it was also a haphazard one, as he did not emasculate flowers, clean his pollen brush or cover his crosses. The origins of his seedlings are mainly very vague. Two clones, however, involved, as the seed-parent, the plant we grew as "*H. atrorubens*", which has since been given the uninspired but very accurate name of 'Early Purple' by Brian Mathew. 'Aldebaran', a similarly early red-purple, was exceptionally prolific in its vegetative increase but was otherwise undistinguished. Eric thought very highly of the other, 'Electra', a cross with the dark *H. torquatus*, but, though it is a pleasant enough little well-shaped purple, I cannot confess to any great personal enthusiasm for this either. The little work he did away from Section Helleborastrum was both planned and rewarding. He had never succeeded in crossing *H. niger* with *H.*

argutifolius, despite annual attempts, but not to be confounded, he pollinated one of the clumps of *H. niger*, which we kept potted under glass, with *H. × sternii* pollen. This was successful and produced some fine, remarkably even hybrids. Inspired with such success, he moved on to using *H. lividus* pollen on *H. niger*. Though the vegetative increase of clones from such crosses was not worthwhile commercially, the cross between *H. niger* and *H. lividus* in particular is far from being uncommercial, as the seedlings which are going to show the hybrid characteristics mostly germinate, like *H. lividus*, in autumn and can be segregated then, leaving those which will look like plain *H. niger* to germinate later.

Though Eric's association with the other hellebore enthusiasts of the period was mainly personal and involved many visitors to Buckshaw Gardens in spring, he maintained a long correspondence with Sergei Nolbandov in Sussex. Every year a multitude of neatly inscribed seed packets would arrive, all to be sown separately in small pots by Eric. I cannot recollect any outstanding seedlings from this source, nor can I remember all the cultivar names Nolbandov had bestowed on his favourites. I do remember 'Grace Hood', mainly because she was followed by 'Grace Hood II' and then 'Grace Hood III'; I was not approving. However, this dynastic concept must have had a secret appeal to Eric, as, after he had retired from commercial nursery work in 1975, I found plants labelled 'Sirius II' and 'Sirius III'.

While Eric took all the small stocks of his newer hostas with him when he left Buckshaw, he only wanted the pots of the current year's seedlings of hellebores. This left me to consolidate and sort out the established clumps and larger stocks, a task complicated by his stratagem of splitting a clone into three when it was first selected and planting the divisions in three different parts of the nursery. Such divisions were not always named and he did not number such plants, so all that existed might be a label saying something like 'Small, extra dark, blue purple *H. torquatus* hybrid'. The Zodiac types were especially numerous, and we had

substantial stocks of ten separate clones to line out in adjacent blocks. After allowing them to establish for a few years, I had no alternative but to conclude that 'Leo' and 'Aries' were the same clone and represented four of the blocks. I was never wholly satisfied that 'Capricornus' was different, and 'Taurus', while certainly distinguishable, was not really substantially distinct either. A few of the clones he had named and which existed only as a single plant or very small stocks were never located. Although I took him to the nursery at hellebore time for several years, he could never identify with assurance such clones as 'Algol', 'Arcturus', 'Vega', 'Ganymede', 'Pegasus', 'Perseus', 'Saturn' and 'Uranus'. Some selections quite simply did not lend themselves to vegetative increase. Such were 'Mira', a crimson-dusted white, 'Praesepe', a strange ivory with washed-out crimson streaks, and 'Draco', a beautiful rose pink, in which the zone of basal spots had amalgamated into a solid, soft crimson patch. These were passed to friends in the hope that their characteristics would manifest themselves in more vigorous seedlings.

While we grew and distributed a very much larger volume of hellebores after Eric left, I could not afford the luxury of retaining seedling beds from which to select clones in flower. Almost all the hellebores were sold wholesale either as young seedlings for growing-on or as budded plants in larger containers. Fortunately we had sufficiently discriminating retailing contacts, who appreciated what we were supplying, to give us reports on the quality of the latter. There was no doubt that 'Cosmos', 'Sirius' and 'Aquarius' produced outstanding seedlings. Some were doubtless better in some respects than the parents, which brings into question the value of propagating selected clones. Although our main sales were in seedlings, I did not neglect vegetative propagation and worked up stocks to several hundred of the Zodiac clones. One year we had over 200 'Pluto' available for wholesale distribution. I wonder where they all went eventually. While neither my circumstances nor my inclinations after 1975 were

conducive to naming a multitude of clones, a few were selected and propagated. Some years earlier I had prevailed on Eric to retain three seedlings in which he had no great interest but which seemed to me to possess an outstanding new characteristic. They had a pale ground colour coupled with bronze-crimson nectaries and staining at the bases of the segments. These are white 'Aquila', pink-veined 'Carina' and cream 'Orion'. 'Carina' was my favourite but 'Orion' is proving the better garden-plant. The observant might have noted that, while I felt it appropriate to retain Eric's astronomical theme in these names, I moved to the southern skies. For the few I regarded more exclusively as my own, I started using the specific names of moths of the family Saturniidae, creatures of the night with sufficient affinity to the planets to provide continuity. 'Selene' was selected as an outstanding green, something Eric had not been inclined to pursue enthusiastically, out of seedlings from some of my Balkan *H. cyclophyllus* possibly pollinated with 'Sirius'. Her initial vigour and the perfection of her lime yellow flowers have not been altogether retained over the years. It is still early to assess the long-term possibilities of black-purple 'Inca', with dull-black cauline leaves, and red-purple 'Zuleika', but mushroom pink and primrose 'Titania' is well established in our affection and proving an excellent plant here in Wales. This trio, the last of the hellebores to be named at Buckshaw, owes much to the influence of *H. torquatus* and brings us back full circle to Eric's early, inspired hybrid.

I am told there is a hellebore being distributed as 'Eric's Best'. What this might be I could not say, but I can certainly see Eric muttering with indignation at such presumption as he wanders among the clumps of *H. cyclophyllus* in the Elysian fields. He loved all his children. It would have been impossible for him to think of any as his 'best'. On the other hand, it might not be wholly inappropriate if the perpetrator of such a name followed it with 'Eric's Best II' and 'Eric's Best III'.