

Common Name: **Hellebore**

Genus: *Helleborus*

Species: *niger*

Family: Ranunculaceae

AKA: Black Hellebore, Christmas Rose, Fetter-wort, Bear's-foot, Christmas-herb



Historical Uses:

**‘Borage and hellebore fill two scenes,
Sovereign plants to purge the veins
Of melancholy, and cheer the heart
Of those black fumes which make it smart’**
from Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1631

Medical: “Helleboreus niger, which some call Melampodium, since it is thought that one **Melampus**, a goatherd, did thereby first purge, and cure ye daughters of **Proteus**, being mad.” (1)

“The roots are very effectual against all melancholic diseases, especially such as are of long standing as quartan agues and madness; it helps with the following sickness, the leprosy, the yellow and black jaundice, the gout, sciatica, and convulsions; or, used as a pestary, provoke of the terms exceedingly. The same being beaten to powder, and strewed upon foul ulcers, consumes the dead flesh, and instantly heals them; it will also help gangrenes by taking inwardly twenty grains thereof corrected with half as much cinnamon.” (2)

“Black Hellebor purgeth downwards flegme, choler, and also melancholy especially, and all melancholy humors, yet not without trouble and difficultie: therefore it is not to be given but to robustious and strong bodies, as **Mefues** teaches. A purgation of Hellebor is good for mad and furious men, for melancholy, dull and heavy persons, for those that are troubled with the following sickness, for lepers, for them that are sick with a quartane Ague, and briefly for all those that are troubled with blacke choler, and molested with melancholy. It is given with wine of raisins or oxymel, but for pleasantnes take some sweet and odiferous seeds must be put into it: but if you would have it stronger, add thereunto a grain or two of Scamonie.” (3)





Note: Gerard appears to make a distinction between Blacke Hellebore and the Black Hellebore of *Dioscorides*. The description of the Blacke Hellebore of *Dioscorides* can be found on page 978 of Gerard's Herbal

“It dissolves and purges black bile, corrodes putrid flesh in foul ulcers, cleans away scabies, spots, morphews, and leprosy, eases toothache, and cures fistulas in three days. It also destroys worms in the

years, helps epilepsy, pains in the joints, and palsy, brings on the menses, and causes abortion.) It was given for that purpose to the daughters of *King Argos* in the milk of goats that had been fed on hellebore. It hallowed dwellings by driving off evil spirits, and kept them away from cattle, whose coughs and sores were healed by placing hellebore leaves in slits in their ears or dewlaps.” (4)

Folklore/Astrology: Herb of Saturn, consequently would be taken with greater safety purified than when raw.” (5)

“Blacke Hellebor, as *Galen* holdeth opinion, is hotter in taste than the white Hellebor: in like manner hot and dry in the third degree.” (6)

“It tenderized game when put on the tips of arrows, Hellebore was always gathered by circling it with a sword while praying to *Apollo* and *Aesculapius* for permission to dig it up. Should an eagle approach at that time, the digger would die within the year. Garlic was eaten to counteract its noxious effects, and it was given to those possessed by the devil. Being of evil omen, it was a plant of Saturn, but cured deafness caused by witchcraft. Sorcerers scattered its powder in their path in order to pass invisibly.” (7)

Other: “The generic name of this plant is derived from the Greek *elein* (to injure) and *bora* (food), and indicates its poisonous nature. The specific name refers to the dark colored rootstock. Once people blessed their





Close-up of Hellebore flowers

cattle with this plant to keep them from evil spells and for this purpose, it was dug up with certain mystic rites. In an old French romance, the sorcerer, to make himself invisible when passing through the enemy's camp, scatters powdered hellebore in the air, as he goes." (8)

Contemporary Uses:

Parts Used: Rhizome, roots, leaves

Medicinal: "Toxic when taken in all but the smallest doses, the acrid Black hellebore is purgative and cardio tonic, expels worms, and promotes menstrual flow. In the 20th century, the cardiac glycosides in the leaves came into use as a heart stimulant for the elderly. The herb has also been taken to stimulate delayed menstruation.

However, black hellebore is now considered too strong to be safely used." (9)

Cautions: Extremely toxic if eaten. Be careful when handling this plant!

Area of Origin: Native to Europe

Physical description: Semi – evergreen perennial with leathery dark leaves which are divided into between seven and nine ovate, toothed leaflets.

Plant type: Semi-evergreen perennial

Height: 6 to 12 inches tall on average.

Flower color: White or white with pink flush

Flowering period: Spring to early summer

Soil type/requirements: Moist, rich neutral to alkaline soil in partial shade. Thrives in heavy clay soils

Hardiness zone: USDA zone 3

Sun requirements: Partial shade

Propagation: By seed sown when ripe; by division after flowering or in late summer

Cautions: : Extremely toxic if eaten. Be careful when handling this plant!

Sources

1. Dioscorides , book 4, plant 150-152
2. Culpeper, p.74
3. Gerard, p. 997 – 998
4. Anderson, p. 144
5. Culpeper, p. 74
6. Gerard, p. 977
7. Anderson, p. 144
8. Grieve, p. 388
9. Chevallier, p. 218-219

Illustrations/Images:

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| 1. Fuchs Herbal | 1543 |
| 2. PSUMG | 2015 |
| 3. PSUMG | 2017 |
| 4. PSUMG | 2017 |