

Inspiration and innovations from the world of garden design.

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HAUTE HELLEBORE

Soil wintry outside? Bring the first blooms inside.
BY MEG RYAN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEORGIANNA LANE



1. Bouquet of *Helleborus 'hybridus'* 'Party Dress', 'Mardi Gras Maroon Red', 'Onyx Odyssey', 'Mardi Gras Slate Blue', and a spotted hellebore with 'Tête à Tête' daffodils, blossoms of pink Peonies, ferns, and variegated Italian buckhorn. **2.** Arranging a selection of double hellebores in this 16-inch blue and white bowl shows off these naturally drooping blossoms. For table decor with a twist, fill a shallow bowl about three-fourths with water; trim the flowers, leaving about half an inch of the stems, and place them in the water. Tidy up the stems when they drop.

There's a certain mystery to the hellebore that makes it seem like the perfect flower. Maybe it's the provocative name, or the immense variety of intense colors that tend toward deep purple and black, or the blossoms that turn away from the first sunlight of spring. There's also the fact that it is kind of the perfect flower: requires little care, thrives in shady corners of the garden where not much else grows, tolerates most soils, universally disliked by deer. But what makes hellebores feel so magical is summed up by

Erin Benzakis, a former florist and owner of Perpet in Mount Vernon, Washington: "Hellebores bloom at a time when there's not much else going on." *Helleborus* belong to the Ranunculaceae family (in spite of its common name, Lenten Rose, nowhere near Rosaceae) and comprises about 20 species. All of them grow in Zones 4 through 9 and start blooming as soon as late January. In addition to the colorful single and semidouble blossoms (which are actually sepals, not petals), many grow on tall, stately stems and feature

interesting foliage—making them an altogether beautiful cut flower. When cutting, Benzakis recommends harvesting hellebores after the seedpod starts to form. "They'll last a week or more in the vase," she says. Some of her favorites: *Helleborus fortidus* (stinking hellebore), for its bold band of red; the grayish green foliage and 2-foot (sometimes 4-foot) stems of *H. arifolius* (Corsican hellebore) helps it stand up well in a bouquet; the hybrids of *H. orientalis* require more light. With their varied colors and foliage,

"there's not one I don't love," she says. If you can resist cutting them, Benzakis says, wait until early tulips are blooming. "They pair especially well with 'La Belle Époque' tulips," she says. And a tulip-edge vase complements any hellebore arrangement: "They can face in all directions and nod down over the lip." Seattle-based photographer Georgianna Lane suggests cutting the stems about one half inch from the sepals and placing the blooms in a shallow bowl of water as one way to display them. Presenting

them this way offers a different perspective and allows the flowers to last about a week. It's a nice way to slow off their beauty since the way hellebores nod makes them somewhat hard to appreciate in the garden. Lane takes a seasonal approach to arrangements, pairing hellebores with whatever happens to be in the garden. "Though in January that's not much," she says. But she might use fern fronds, daffodils, Peonies, or Italian buckhorn flowers. For bereaver and hybridizer Barry Glick, *Helleborus 'hybridus'* make excellent

3. "I like to cut hellebores before the stamens have fully opened out because they're at their prettiest then," Georgianna Lane says. **4.** Cut blooms of mixed hellebores including *Helleborus 'hybridus'* 'Party Dress', 'Mardi Gras Maroon Red', 'Mardi Gras Slate Blue', and blossoms of Peonies, Japanese and variegated Italian buckhorn. "The buckhorn lasts a very long time," she says. **5.** Abundant floral bouquet of spring blooms including ranunculus, hellebores, parrot tulip, white bleeding heart, Pacific bleeding heart, and Leucocodium.

garden and cut flowers, not only for the blooms but for the evergreen foliage. His Sunshower Farm and Gardens in Renick, West Virginia, is renowned for its 6 acres of original hybrids and most species of *Helleborus*. "Don't ignore the foliage," he says of selecting hellebores, "because it has a lot to offer." Glick uses the foliage, sometimes sans blossom, in his arrangements. Above are some of Lane's favorite design ideas for cutting, arranging, and mixing spring's first flower.