

Hellebores: Divide and Multiply

By Carmine Carosella, Fairfax Master Gardener

You've seen all those fancy hellebores at the garden shops, and they set your heart aflutter. Their fancy prices, however, rip your budget apart. What's a gardener to do? Well, one easy and inexpensive way to increase your collection is to divide an existing plant.

Most of the hellebores in the marketplace are hybrid plants grown from tissue culture or seed. Seed production of hellebores is done by hand-pollinating crosses from two different parents; the plant that results from the cross breeding is called an F1 hybrid. Most hellebores do readily seed in the garden by open pollination, but usually these offspring are very much inferior to their F1 parents. Some traits — for example, variegated leaves — never transfer to the seedlings. Furthermore, seeded hellebores demand patience, requiring 3 to 4 years before bloom. A better way to ensure replicas of the original plant and to enjoy flowers fast is to divide hellebores. A hellebore divided in autumn will produce a beautiful plant early the following spring.

Dividing a hellebore is quite easy. The best time to do so is in fall, before new foliage emerges. Another good time is in early spring, before the hot weather starts and just after the hellebore flowers. Choose a healthy, mature plant — one whose clones you can't live without — and make sure it has multiple, well-defined crowns.

Carefully dig the hellebore with a large ball of soil, starting about 10 inches outside the ring of foliage and digging 12 inches or so deep. Now comes the key step: Knock off as much of the soil as possible, and then spray off the remaining soil with water from a hose. The plant's rhizome and the individual crowns should become clearly visible.

Examine your plant to see where its natural divisions lie. Each targeted division should include leaves, a piece of the rhizome, and fresh roots. Using a sharp knife with a long blade, cut through the rhizome at the proper spots, and then carefully tease apart any entangled roots.



This hellebore was divided in the fall, and it was blooming the following spring

photo: by author



Hellebore dug in spring after removing the dirt with a water spray

photo: by author

A hellebore will yield from two to as many as 10 divided plants. You should plant the divided plants immediately, making sure the roots do not dry out. Plant them in well-prepared soil with good drainage. Build a small mound of soil in the hole to support the plant's crown just below the soil level. Spread the roots over the mound and back-fill the hole. Firm the soil around the plant and water to avoid air pockets around the roots. Do not let the plants dry out during the subsequent season.



photo: by author

Four divided hellebores from one plant

Share the plants with friends or just increase your own collection. The divided hellebores will soon conquer your heart!

References

[Hellebores: Near Perfection in a Plant](#), Marsha Goldberg, Fairfax Gardening
Hellebores: A Comprehensive Guide, by Burrell & Tyler, Timber Press Inc.