Lenten Rose

Lenten rose (*Helleborus x hybridus*) makes a wonderful addition to the shade garden or naturalized area with a bloom time heralding the beginning of spring. They grow well in USDA cold hardiness zones 4-9, which covers all of South Carolina, and are a fantastic choice even for beginning gardeners.

Some varieties have picotee flowers, where the flower color is darker along the edges. Others have darkened floral veins, spots or blotches of red, purple or pink. Although less common, plants with double or semi-double flowers also may be found for sale.

The petals of the Lenten rose are actually sepals, and do not drop readily as with other flowers, but last for a couple of months. Darker purple blooms often fade to a pastel pink over the 8- to 10-week bloom and fruiting period. As the flower turns into a fruit, seed production begins, and mature seeds are dropped beneath the canopy of foliage. Soon small seedlings will appear in dense clusters which can be readily transplanted to additional shady sites.

**Landscape Features**

Lenten rose is an evergreen, 15- to 18-inch tall groundcover with leathery, dark-green, shiny foliage. Their new growth generally appears during late January and February, and precedes the 3- to 4-inch nodding, cup-shaped flowers that quickly emerge through the mulch or snow layer.

The flowers are most commonly white or lavender, but breeders have developed crosses with shades of pink, plum, green, dark purple, red and yellow.
Problems

Lenten rose was selected “Plant of the Year” in 2005 by the Perennial Plant Association because of many superior characteristics. Once established, Lenten rose readily tolerates drought. Under extreme drought conditions established plants may droop, but they quickly perk up again after watering, with no damage to the foliage. Few other plants can survive under such dry and shady conditions. They are naturally deer and rabbit repellent, have very few insect pests or disease problems, and require little care.

Landscape Use

Lenten roses have coarse-textured, dissected foliage, which combines especially well in the landscape with the delicate foliage of ferns, the more rounded foliage of hosta, and smaller-leafed perennials and shrubs. Being evergreen is also useful in beds which contain other shade-loving perennials that are deciduous, as this provides winter-interest when the other plants are dormant.

Some gardeners cut back the old foliage just before the flowers appear in late winter to enhance visibility of the blooms. This, however, is not necessary, as the flower stalks will eventually tower above the old foliage.

Lenten roses are long-lived plants and rarely need dividing. To enhance plant growth, they can be fertilized with a slow-release fertilizer when new foliage begins to appear in late winter.
Propagation
New plants can be expensive to purchase, but once a few are planted and bloom in the garden, seedlings will appear the next spring to provide numerous transplants.

For best growth, these seedlings may be potted into 4-inch containers with a well-drained potting soil. Transplant these back into the garden in the fall or into larger containers for the subsequent year. Plants should be spaced 15 inches or more apart in well-drained soil. If the soil is a heavy clay type, the addition of composted pine bark or a soil conditioner mixed throughout the bed will speed plant growth and establishment. Although it generally takes three years for a young plant to be of flowering size, it is well worth the wait.

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