



Deep stock beds within Juliet Davis's Somerset garden are filled with mature clumps of hellebores. These varied examples demonstrate Juliet's successes in revealing hidden traits, as her interest in breeding has flourished through the years. She cuts away old leaves in late winter to ensure flowers are clearly displayed in spring.



All of the hybrid seedlings raised by Juliet, such as this pink double flower with attractive purple blotches, are un-named.

# PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT



The art of creating new hellebore hybrids requires time, patience and imagination. An initial collection of three plants soon expanded as Juliet Davis (left) became addicted to the infinite range of flower colours, shapes and patterns in her seedlings

Author: **Jacky Hobbs**, a garden stylist and writer. Photography: **Clive Nichols**



Single apricot, purple spotted.

There are people who fall in love with the nodding winter flowers of hellebores to the point where they become an obsession. And although *Helleborus x hybridus* (Lenten roses) often naturally self-seed around the garden, it is the promise of deliberately creating new flower forms that can be addictive for some.

Juliet Davis could be described as a magician with her hellebores, conjuring up hundreds of exquisite new blooms in shades that refuse to be bound by single-colour categories. Green meddles with rose and inky-black smoulders with rouge, although all it takes is a blink of sunlight and the colours change. Her intuitive hybridising fuses not only colour but form: singles, doubles, anemone-centred with broad, slender, frilled or picotee-edged petals. She adds spots, stripes, blotches and subtle shading to her incredible collection.

Inherent creativity apart, Juliet is a fine gardener. Her garden and stock beds throng with plants each

boasting hundreds of flowerheads, with more buds in waiting.

It is a far cry from the rudimentary garden Juliet and her husband acquired more than 25 years ago. Their 8,000sq m (2 acre) site, on a well-drained limestone escarpment just above Bath, resulted from a house (and garden) swap with her in-laws in 1988. They were not gardeners, so Juliet assumed a blank canvas. By 1995, and while juggling her time raising four small children, she managed to establish a small perennial-plant nursery, Kapunda Plants, which fed a series of annual, largely charitable sales. Business boomed, so in order to simplify things Juliet decided to develop her small collection of Lenten roses, starting with a single purple bloom she had discovered in the garden. Her mother gifted her a white specimen and a friend gave her a spotted flower form.

Intrigued by their diversity, Juliet began to collect the more fascinating specimens from expert growers such as Ashwood Nurseries in the West Midlands and Farnyard >>



## *Hellebore hybridiser*

Nurseries in Carmarthenshire. From this small collection she made her first crosses in 2003, which flowered in 2007 – with many new blooms to follow.

### Charity openings

Late February to April is prime-time viewing in Juliet's garden. The wider garden is neat and trim, supporting an increasing range of early spring bulbs. A yew hedge cradles the thriving collection of hellebore stock plants. This designated stronghold harbours the most floriferous hellebores, in a multitude of colours and forms. To the rear, 12-year-old plants bulge with flowers and bees drone incessantly, gorging on this nectar-rich feast. 'This is more than 10 years work,' Juliet says with pride. Every spring she opens the garden for charity and sells hundreds of her successful (but un-named) hybrids to eager visitors. 'There never seem to be enough,' she says.

Elsewhere in the garden a long, deep shrubbery includes a succession of neatly spaced, immaculately presented hellebores. Here, in 2009 more than 100 individual, two-year-old seedlings were planted with narcissi, foxgloves and hardy geraniums. They thrive in the alkaline

soil and dappled shade of aged pine trees. 'The young hellebores take time to find their feet, but once they begin flowering, there's no stopping them,' Juliet says. 'In spring and autumn I feed them with a fish, blood and bone mix, as well as mulching with home-made compost, which gives plants the vigour to produce their stunning flowers.' From November onwards she cuts off old leaves to prevent the spread of hellebore leaf spot, a fungal infection.

### Breeding under cover

In the confines of her purpose-built greenhouse Juliet makes her own deliberate crosses. 'I hybridise from a wide selection of my most beautiful plants. Colour and flower shape is a major preoccupation,' she says. 'I have created a few good reds and I'm working on vintage peach colours, blue-greys and yellows.'

Beyond colour, anemone centres and dark-hued nectaries are characteristics Juliet aims to introduce into plants with upright habit and outward-facing flowers, so their attributes can be admired.

With so many crosses being made, there is seemingly no end to the combinations of flower markings, colours or forms to discover. ●



## Creating new hybrids

Hellebores weekend at Rosemoor: Diary, p87

Throughout February and March the benches are full of blooming plants in Juliet's greenhouse, ready to create new hybrids. It is crucial to catch the flowers in bud, just as the stigma emerge in the centre of the opening flower (but the stamens are still immature). She carefully removes a pollen-laden stamen with tweezers from an open flower on the selected donor plant. The bud of the receiving flower is prised open before brushing the pollen against the sticky stigma. A colour-coded loop of wool attached to the flower stem denotes each cross.

The seed capsules swell and, from the middle of May, she collects the shiny black, ripened seeds and sows them immediately into little pots, topped with a sprinkling of gravel. Once labelled and watered, Juliet places these pots outdoors in cool shade.

Cold weather in January breaks dormancy and promotes germination, after which seedlings start to appear. By March they are ready for potting on into individual pots. Given time, the seedlings develop into full grown plants, eventually flowering to reveal their unique new appearances.



The flowers of *Helleborus x hybridus* naturally face downwards but Juliet is striving to develop strains with a more upright habit to expose flower interiors.



To ensure success, ripe pollen from a stamen (above left) is brushed onto the receptive central stigma (above right) of another flower before its bud has fully opened, thus ensuring it remains unaffected by pollinating insects.

### KAPUNDA PLANTS

Kapunda, Southstoke Lane, Bath, Somerset BA2 5SH; 01225 832165; [www.kapundaplants.co.uk](http://www.kapundaplants.co.uk)

**Open:** this year on Sunday 6 March and Sunday 20 March for charity, both 2–4pm.

**Admission:** £4. The garden is also open by appointment to garden clubs and societies.