

A budding success

At this time of year, hellebore breeder Juliet Davis is on tenterhooks to see what new colours will emerge, finds Val Bourne

Photographs by Clive Nichols

HELLEBORES have a wonderful sense of timing: they flower just as winter begins to give way to spring and they're always magnificent in March. That's when Juliet Davis opens her garden at Southstoke, not far from the centre of Bath. There, she has developed her own strain of oriental hellebores, or *Helleborus x hybridus*, named after Kapunda, an early-20th-century castellated house that has been in the family of her husband, Martin, since 1937.

The couple moved in with their young family in 1988 and, as time allowed, Juliet began to develop the two-acre garden, which was then little more than a grassy sward.

Juliet grew up in Angus in Scotland and inherited her green fingers from her grandfather, who was a lupin enthusiast. 'I used to follow him about and I made my first spring garden when I was only six or seven years old. If the sun's shining, I just want to be out there.'

Propagating is her passion and, in the early days, she raised lots of hardy geraniums, which were sold at local plant fairs. 'I realised that there were more and more small nurseries selling rarer plants raised from plugs. I wanted to do my own thing and I wanted to raise plants from seed, not simply grow things on. We had one purple hellebore in the garden, which had been there for many years and I decided to track some more down.'

In 2003, when she began collecting, there was something of a hiatus in the hellebore world because the early pioneers had already come and gone. It was too late to visit Elizabeth Strangman's renowned Washfield Nursery at Hawkhurst in Kent, for instance, because she had already retired.

However, her two wild-collected double forms of *Helleborus torquatus*, found

in Montenegro in 1971 and subsequently christened Dido and Aeneas, alerted others to the possibility of double-flowered hellebores. Robin White at Blackthorn Nursery, in rural Hampshire, named his own race of doubles as Party Dress hybrids. (Essential when visiting Robin's Hellebore Days was a stash of £1 notes, a large wheelbarrow and a friend to guard your treasures.)

The late Helen Ballard's hellebores, the most highly regarded of all in the 1980s, were selected for clear colour and perfectly rounded flowers. She gave them evocative names, such as Greencups, but most had to be ordered in hope rather than certainty, because hellebores can't be divided into small pieces and demand always outstripped supply.

All these early breeders relied on material collected from wild plants, of which, roughly, 20 species are spread mainly through Central and Southern Europe and on the Iberian peninsula.

Britain has two natives: the stinking hellebore (*Helleborus foetidus*), which is far more attractive than it sounds, and the green hellebore, *H. viridis* subsp. *occidentalis*. Both of these greenflowered hellebores grow within miles of my Gloucestershire cottage.

Garden hellebores are hybrids of some of these species and recent hellebore breeders, including Hugh Nunn of Harvington Hellebores and John Massey of Ashwood Nurseries, had to source their species from botanic gardens or plant hunters, such as the late Will McLewin. They opted to raise plants from seed rather than division and have improved hybrid hellebores greatly.

Ashwood Nurseries in the West Midlands and Farmyard Nurseries in Carmarthen-shire were Juliet's starting points and she acquired a range of colours and types from them, including anemone-centred kinds, >

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Double, two-tone *Helleborus x hybridus*, an eye-catching hybrid bred by Juliet Davis. Hellebore crosses aren't given names because they can't be grown true from seed





Top left: An unusual *Helleborus torquatus* double, typically single flowered. Top right: The reverse of a single speckled hellebore. As the blooms bend down, the backs of the petals are important. Above left: Speckled double hellebore. Above right: Anemone-centred hellebore

Top left: Double peach picotee, chrysanthemum-style flower. Top right: Yellow anemone-centred hellebore. Above left: Anemone-centred hellebore with two-tone nectary. Above middle: Spotted anemone-centred hellebore. Above right: Single hellebore with golden nectary

singles and doubles. 'I began crossing them straight away and my first seedlings flowered in 2007. It's a long, patient process and I sold 17 plants in 2007. They weren't very exciting, but I was delighted, because I'd raised them.'

Currently, Juliet has 120 pots of seedlings waiting to be pricked out: 'Far too many.' Each 3½-in-round pot has a simple label, such as 'Double white' or 'Picotee edge', the latter referring to a fine rim of colour round the petals.

In January or February, she begins to bring her selected mother plants into the vine house on the warm side of her home.

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This is kept as free from bees as possible, to prevent accidental crosses. 'Sometimes, I'll pick a newly opened flower from the garden and take off the stamens using tweezers. Then, I'll transfer the pollen onto

another plant. The ideal time to do this is when the flower is just opening, because the style is far stickier.'

She adds: 'I tend to do "like for like" crosses, perhaps two good white-spotted ones that are slightly different. If it's a single, I'll cross it with another good single. If it's a double, I'll transfer pollen to another double.'

Doubles are more difficult to pollinate because the buds are full of petals and the stigmas are tiny. 'I don't use a paintbrush—the pollen is transferred using tweezers and it's all done in the greenhouse. You have to have a good eye and a steady hand and only use the best.'

She makes a few 'crazy crosses' as well, involving two very different colours or forms. 'I get very excited in February when the buds begin to open, because I don't know what will happen after my four-year wait.'

At the moment, there's a lovely picotee double white with very fine deep-pink veining matching the fine rim round the petals. The backs of the petals are deep pink as well—important, because the backs are what you see when the blooms bend over in the garden. Anemone-centred ones are favourites of hers and she has some good peaches as well.

Her own garden, which contains lots of fine trees, is on high ground and this creates >

Juliet's hellebore advice

- Hellebores are hungry plants. Feed them with blood, fish and bone or a slow-release general fertiliser, such as Vitax Q4, in early spring. Add a good layer of compost in February, putting it round each plant
- Remove the leaves in November or December, leaving an inch of stem intact
- Hellebores are prone to the leafspot disease *Microsphaeropsis hellebori* (syn. *Coniothyrium hellebori*), so don't compost the leaves
- Deadhead your hellebores by early May, unless you want to collect seeds.

This prevents unwanted, inferior seedlings from popping up everywhere. If you are going to sow seeds, do it as soon as the pods split

- The best way to move a hellebore is to dig it up in the autumn. Take care not to damage the roots
- To divide a plant, split it into large chunks, because small pieces die
- If you buy a pot-bound hellebore, with the roots circling the pot, you'll need to distress the roots, by cutting away the bottom couple of inches and teasing out the side roots, otherwise it won't take off

dappled shade and good drainage in winter. The soil is alkaline. Juliet tries to provide more cover for the paler whites and yellows, because these suffer more from frost damage than the darker colours.

One large sweeping bed contains a mixture of colourful hellebores interspersed with purple-tinted single late and Triumph tulips, such as Jan Reus, Havran and Queen of the Night. By the time the tulips arrive, the hellebore flowers have taken on a green tinge, so they go well together.

Blue camassias and white narcissi, such as the multi-headed *Narcissus* Thalia, add to the colour and dark hellebores are always flattered by blue.

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A double form of snowdrop, *Galanthus nivalis* Flore Pleno, from Scotland, lines the drive. ‘They do very well in full sun,’ Juliet notes. The garden also contains lots of deciduous shrubs for summer colour.

Her next challenge is to produce some better slate-greys, using *Helleborus torquatus*, a species with green-tinted dusky flowers. ‘They’re coming on and I also have some good reds in the pipeline.’

‘Every spring, there’s something new to see, a unique plant that I’ve created. I feel that it’s important to share your plants and enthuse other people.’

To this end, her open days benefit two local charities: ‘They do the teas and man the gate and I supply the plants.’ With hellebores making winter bearable for many gardeners, they sell out every year.

Kapunda Plants, Southstoke Lane, Bath (01225 832165; www.kapundaplants.co.uk). The open days this year are on March 3 and March 24, from 2pm to 4pm. Admission is £5 in support of local charities. The garden is also open by appointment to garden clubs and societies



Above: A single raspberry/pale green hellebore cross with dramatic dark nectaries and a picotee edge. Below: A massed display of hellebores in Juliet Davis’s garden

