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Helleborus

Ranunculaceae

Helleborus is for some derived from a Greek name for the Lenten rose (*Helleborus orientalis*) *helleboros* which itself is derived from Greek *hellion* (to kill) and *bora* (food) components with reference to the plants' poisonous qualities.

In the Middle Ages in Europe several species of *Hellebore* were used medicinally, including the green and stinking hellebores (*Helleborus viridis* and *Helleborus foetidus* respectively). The English barber-surgeon and herbalist (the latter as a charlatan for many authorities), John Gerard (1545-1612), referred in his writings to the long tradition behind its use for mental illness. At the same time the belief in its power to repel evil spirits still survived and for this reason the flowers would be strewn on the floors of homes, used as a protection against witches as well as to break spells and charms (the witches themselves included them in their potions), and to bless both homes and animals.

Now apart from homoeopathic tinctures used for the treatment of some psychoses, no medicinal use is made of any of the hellebores. They used to be employed as a local anaesthetic and a heart tonic, and they were prescribed for period problems and other conditions. One of these other 'conditions' was lice and records show that when used for this purpose hellebores could cause an abortion for a pregnant woman.