

Helleborus niger

CHRISTMAS ROSE is an evergreen perennial. Native to Europe (particularly the southern and central Alps and to the Apennines), it has white flowers (rose-tinted outside) with numerous bright golden stamens.

It is also known as Alpine hellebore, Bearsfoot, Black hellebore, Brumal rose, *Čemerica čierna* (Slovak), *Čemeřice černá* (Czech), Easter rose, Hellebore, Christe herbe, Christmas herb, Christmas plant, Christopher's herb, *Christrose* (German), Christ's herb, Christ's wort, Clove tongue, *Elleboro nero* (Italian), *Heleboro nigra* (Esperanto), *Julros* (Swedish), *Kalukutki* (Bengali), *Katurchini* (Sanskrit), *Kerstroos* (Dutch), *Khorasani kutki* (Hindi), Lenten rose, Melampode, Melampodium, *Poumillière* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Rose dé Noël* (French), *Rose dé Noué* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Rozo kristnaska* (Esperanto), St. Agnes flower, St. Agnes rose, *Schneerose* (German), *Schwarze Nieswurz* (German), *Svart prustrot* (Swedish), and *Vaaleajouluruusu* (Finnish); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of calumny, 'relieve my anxiety', and scandal.

There are various hybrids that produce flowers of crimson, pink, purple and white.

Warning – all parts of the plant are poisonous. It can cause salivation, oral tingling, violent inflammation in the stomach and intestines (and on the skin), diarrhoea, vomiting, paralysis of the central nervous system and death. It can only be used under the supervision of a qualified practitioner.

Niger means 'black' with reference to the colour of the root.

Flowering through Winter to early Spring according to some authorities the plant came to be called names such as Christmas rose or in Medieval times particularly Christ's herb. However a medieval nativity play suggests an alternative reason. When Madelon, a country girl, goes to Bethlehem with the shepherds to see the baby Jesus she is saddened at realizing that she does not even have a gift of flowers as it is Winter. But an angel comes to help her in her distress and leads her outside the stable. There the angel touches the ground and the first Christmas rose emerges. The common name St. Agnes flower arises because the flower is dedicated to the patron saint of young virgins.

Long before the birth of Christ however records show that the ancient Egyptians, and then the Greeks and the Romans, were all familiar with the plant and respected it for its qualities in treating mental illness. One of the Greek legends tells how Proteus, the King of Argos, persuaded a noted seer and healer, Melampus, to treat his three mad princess-daughters. To do this Melampus turned successfully to the Christmas rose whose virtues had been shown to him by the goats grazing in his pastures.

The ancient Greeks performed long religious rites when they harvested the plant for medicinal use. It could not be collected if an eagle hovered nearby as this would mean death within the year for the gatherer, who was also recommended to eat garlic to mask the plant's odour. Provided these precautions were taken, a sword was used to circumscribe the plant and, while prayers were offered both to Apollo (the god of poetry and music) and to Asclepius (the god of healing) the Christmas rose was successfully lifted.

In the Christian tradition the flower is an emblem of the Nativity of Christ.

It is said in Dorset, in the south of England, that if you plant Christmas rose at the doorstep it will flourish as it will 'welcome Christ into your home'.

The powdered roots of Christmas rose provided an ingredient for sneezing powder. In continental Europe this is a commercial ingredient for some brands of snuff.

The plant is used in veterinary medicine.

Medicinally, herbalists once used Christmas rose as a laxative and also employed it in the treatment of some period disorders. Today it is rarely used apart from in homoeopathic treatments. In India the roots have provided a local anaesthetic and they have also been applied to skin disorders.

It is the birthday flower for 25th December.