



## Christmas Roses – Beautiful but not Houseplants

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

The selection of seasonal holiday plants this year, whether from local greenhouses or in-store floral departments was absolutely phenomenal. Poinsettias were bedazzling in a riot of colors, sizes, and flower shapes. Amaryllis stems were pointing skyward with promise. Cyclamen and holiday cacti tempted buyers with jewel-tone blooms. Amidst the more conventional seasonal plant offerings at a local grocery store, of all places, was a tray of gorgeous, white flowering ‘Christmas roses’.

Real, miniature roses were also for sale, but these 5-petaled, white beauties are actually a hardy perennial flower known as hellebores. The white ones (*Helleborus niger* and hybrids) are often referred to as Christmas roses because of a folk tale centering around a Nativity gift and because they typically bloom this time of year in mild winters. These plants would be much happier in a well sited garden bed than in a pot in a warm, heated house.



Potted hellebores for sale at local grocery store. Photo by dmp2021.

Many people, taken by their beauty, likely purchased plants as gifts for others or even for themselves. The challenge will be keeping these hardy perennials in good shape until they can be planted outdoors, most likely in late March or April.

There are about 20 hellebore species as well as numerous hybrids but the ones sold as Christmas roses are hardy from USDA zones 4 to 9, and in more sheltered areas in Connecticut or during mild winters, they will be sending up their flower buds about now. The flowers, which are actually sepals, last for many weeks in the garden. In colder areas of the state or during more frigid winters, plants will bloom later in winter or even in early spring.

Do note that all hellebores are poisonous if ingested. Keep plants out of reach from young children or curious pets.

The key to keeping a potted Christmas rose in good health until it can be planted outdoors is proper light, watering, and temperatures. While plants can be set in a spot to be admired when entertaining, the rest of the time they will appreciate being placed in a bright, sunny windowsill. In the garden, part shade or filtered sunlight is appropriate but at this low light level time of year, full sun is not too bright for them.

When watering, keep plants on the dry side and avoid getting water on the leaves or blossoms. Stick your finger in the pot and if more than the top half inch feels dry, give it a good watering and be sure any excess water drains from the pot.

Even those of us who like it cool, probably keep our homes warmer than hellebores like. If that sunny window is in an unheated spare room, basement or sunroom, plants will be happier. While these plants were forced in bright, cool greenhouses, they can be injured at temperatures around freezing or below. Keep them cool but don't let them freeze.

Often leaves on plants that do not receive enough light or are kept in warm rooms, start turning yellow. Groom plants and remove any faded flowers or yellow leaves. Try to find a brighter and cooler location for plants.

As spring approaches and the weather moderates, you can start acclimating plants so they can be planted outdoors. On warmer late winter or early spring days, plants can be set outside in a sheltered spot or in the window of your garage. Gradually expose them to longer periods outside but bring in if freezing temperatures are predicted. Water sparingly but do not let plants dry out.

Decide where to plant your Christmas rose once spring has arrived and the plant is hardened off. Hellebores enjoy a partially shaded spot with excellent drainage and a soil amended with organic matter. If by some chance your plant doesn't make it until spring planting time, this can be a great excuse to purchase some more at a local garden center and enjoy them year after year in your garden beds.

For questions about caring for hellebores or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.

