



Careful cultivation

A specialist nursery in Lincolnshire uses painstaking traditional methods to create exquisite hybrid hellebores in a spectrum of distinctive shades

TEXT CLARE FOSTER | PHOTOGRAPHS CLIVE NICHOLS



OPPOSITE *Helleborus x hybridus* 'Harvington Double Pink Speckled'. THIS PAGE
Delicate yellow stamens provide a pretty contrast with the pink picotee-edged petals of single-flowered 'Harvington Rebekah'

Spring comes early at Twelve Nunns nursery in Lincolnshire. The hellebores start blooming in December in the polytunnel and continue through to March, their colours bright and clear in the crisp winter light. 'We are out there in hats and gloves hand-pollinating the flowers at this time of year,' says Penny Dawson, who took over breeding Harvington Hellebores from her parents Hugh and Liz Nunn in 2014.

Originally based in the village of Harvington, in the Vale of Evesham, the Nunns started breeding hellebores more than 30 years ago, developing the now well-known range of Harvington hybrids. 'I grew up with it,' recalls Penny. 'When Dad was short of time, I'd be out there after school, pollinating the flowers with a paintbrush and pretending to be a bee.'

Harvington Hellebores are known for their large, rounded flowers in a range of pure, distinctive colours, bred over many years from the nursery's own seed-grown stock. 'It can take up to 10 years to create a new, distinct colour form,' says Penny. 'When you first cross two plants, the progeny will be very variable, so it's a matter of sifting through and selecting the best. By the third or fourth generation, the variability will be less until, finally, the characteristics are more or less fixed.'

Hybridising hellebores requires patience, commitment and above all diligence. Although the mechanics of cross-pollinating by hand are not rocket science – you simply use a paintbrush to transfer pollen from the stamen of one flower to the stigma of another flower – everything must be executed with meticulous care. First, the timing needs to be right. Ironically, since the whole process depends on isolating the plant from other insect sources (otherwise pollen from unwanted plants might be introduced to the mother plant), Penny takes her cue from the bees. 'If it's a sunny day and you can see the bees flying, it's the right time to start hand-pollinating,' she says. Seeds from the pollinated plant will then be collected and sown, but it will be two more years before the seedlings flower, at which point the selection process continues.

Searching through hundreds of flowering plants to find the right ones to continue the breeding line is a bit like selecting a thoroughbred racehorse. 'You have to be so discerning,' says Penny. 'We look for clear colour that isn't wishy-washy or indistinct and strong outward- or upward-facing flowers, as well as fresh green foliage.' Twelve Nunns offers a core palette of colours from pure white and yellow to pinks, apricots and dark purples, both in single and double forms. Newer additions to the Harvington range include a vibrant double lime-green hellebore and a beautiful double red apricot, which has crimson-backed flowers that look amazing with the light shining through them. The nursery is also developing its anemone-centred range, and offers speckled or picotee forms in some colours.

The plants are described by their appearance, rather than being given proper names, as a cultivar would be.



ABOVE *Helleborus niger* 'Harvington Hybrids'. OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT *H. x hybridus* 'Harvington Double Purple Cascade' has a mass of petals in dark plum tones. *H. x hybridus* 'Harvington Double Pink Speckled'. *H. x hybridus* 'Harvington Single Yellow Picotee' has distinctive pink veining. *H. x hybridus* 'Harvington Single Pink'. 'Harvington Double Red Apricot' is a striking recent addition to the range. *H. x hybridus* 'Harvington Double White Speckled'. *H. x hybridus* 'Harvington Double Lime' is also a new introduction. *H. x hybridus* 'Harvington Double Yellow Picotee'. Dramatic *H. x hybridus* 'Harvington Single Black' (centre)

'These are all hybrids produced from seed, so there is genetic variation within the colour groups, although they all appear very similar,' Penny explains. 'To give them a cultivar name, they would have to be genetically identical, and the only way of achieving this is by vegetatively propagating them by division or tissue culture.'

The one plant propagated by division is 'Harvington Rebekah', a recently introduced cross between *H. niger* and *H. x hybridus*, a very special plant with a profusion of picotee pink flowers. Because it takes time to increase numbers of plants by division, stocks are in short supply and it is expensive and can be hard to get hold of. But if you are unable to track down this holy grail of hellebores, do not despair: the nursery produces many thousands of plants a year, which it sells by mail order as well as to the trade, and there will almost certainly be other beauties in the Twelve Nunns range to tempt you instead □

—
Twelve Nunns: twelvenunns.co.uk

