



With paintbrush in hand

Harvington Hellebores, Stamford, Lincolnshire

The art of breeding fine new hellebores has been perfected at a renowned Lincolnshire nursery, finds Jacky Hobbs

Photographs by Clive Nichols

BY turns sultry and bright in the depths of winter, hellebores have a devoted following and the princely Harvington cultivars are the product of one family's fascination with this beguiling plant. Between themselves, the Nunn family have raised more than 25 definitive hellebore cultivars that span the spectrum of white, red, pink, purple, yellow, green, apricot, black, smokey blue and 'Shades of Night'.

The Nunn family have focused on creating both single- and double-flowered blooms in a range of 'fixed' colours,

the result of more than 20 years of dedicated and methodical hybridising. In the process, the breeding programme led to the creation of sought-after frilled, speckled, veined and picotee blooms, all wearing Harvington 'house' colours.

Their origins lie in nurseryman Hugh Nunn's garden at Harvington, in Evesham, Worcestershire, in the late 1980s. His wife, Liz, bewitched by the genus's beauty and diversity, began collecting hellebores from the leading hybridists of the day. Dusky gems were acquired from the renowned grower Helen Ballard, >



Top: Like strawberry mousse with jam stirred in: Harvington Pink Speckled. Above: Scrumptiously dark Harvington Double Purples. Facing page: Rare Harvington Rebekah



in nearby Malvern, whose plants were reproduced by division to ensure precise replication of her named cultivars. Other curious specimens arrived in boxes from pioneering nurseries, including that of Elizabeth Strangman at the former Washfield Nursery, in Kent.

In the days before the advent of insect-proof pollination houses, the Nunn's hellebores were grown in the open, the different colour forms being separated only by being raised in isolated groups, in an attempt to keep colours clean. Mr and Mrs Nunn's daughter Penny recalls rushing home from school at prime hybridising time in late winter to hand-pollinate expectant blooms for £2.50 an hour. 'With a little paintbrush in hand, I would flit around the hellebores and pretend to be a bee,' she recalls.

It turned out to be invaluable early training for the foundation of her own hellebore business. Hybridising specifically within the colour groups gradually improved and standardised the stock so that clear and consistent colours could at last be produced from seed, rather than from vegetative division, which is so much slower to build up commercial stock.

A business burgeons

Some two decades on from the early stages of the enterprise, following a degree and career in landscape management, Penny Dawson (née Nunn) has brought a new angle to the family business with Twelve Nuns, a mail-order and online nursery serving the public direct. 'It was meant to coincide with Mum and Dad slowing things down over at Harvington, but, of course, they're busier than ever,' laughs Mrs Dawson.

In family tradition, her business also grew from her large town garden where, with her own young family at home, she reignited her early interest and began tinkering with the flowers of her childhood. As her enthusiasm burgeoned, so did the plants, necessitating a move to establish a nursery near Stamford, in Lincolnshire.

So far, we know about three Nuns, but what of 12? Mrs Dawson explains: 'There were no heirs to my mother's family name of Twelves, so I created Twelve Nuns to perpetuate the family line. My talented illustrator friend designed a smiling nun logo.' Since its beginnings, she has



Above: Harvington Reds send a blaze of glowing ruby through late-winter borders. Below: Harvington Single White Speckled

extended her own range of plants to include erythroniums, trilliums and roscoea, but, more importantly, continues hellebore-breeding work, sowing and growing the Harvington Hellebore family line.

For more information, visit www.twelvenuns.co.uk or telephone 01778 590455. The nursery supplies through online or telephoned orders only and is not open for browsing

Creating new hellebores

THE objective of the breeding programme was to take *Helleborus orientalis* hybrids and sharpen them up; ordinary hellebores naturally arising from seed may have various imperfections. Once the colour range and vigour of single-flowered hybrids was established, the challenge was to create speckled and clear double-flowered versions. Harvington Rebekah is an exception to the rule. Its deep carmine buds develop into large picotee flowers of a pale blush pink and this cultivar is propagated solely by division. It was a unique chance seedling, a cross between *H. orientalis* and *H. niger*, and is available in small numbers from Twelve Nuns.



Above: Dark-chocolate velvet petals around creamy anthers, Harvington Single Shades of Night is as near black as anyone could wish for in a flower. Right: Harvington Double Apricot has an unusual and uplifting colour



Above: Harvington Double Limes look well among early daffodils. Right: Harvington Picotee, streaked with raspberry and blackcurrant hues. Below: The intricate Harvington Double Yellow Speckled requires close inspection



Success with hellebores

Hellebores thrive in dappled shade, in well-cultivated, fertile and moist soil. If planting from seed, it's essential to sow it freshly collected, in the summer. They're hungry plants, so start them off by digging in lots of free-draining compost or well-rotted manure, water well and apply a general-purpose fertiliser or liquid feed in spring and autumn.

