



GREEN FINGERS

with Sir Roddy Llewellyn

The circle of life

The garden's promise of spring brings brightness to dark days

No one can deny the valuable contribution of the hellebores, the Christmas and Lenten roses, at this time of the year in the garden. Most hellebores hail from central to eastern Europe down to the Mediterranean, and there are two that are indigenous to Britain namely *H. viridis* (the 'green' hellebore – a valuable addition to the border) and *H. foetidus* (the 'stinking' hellebore). These winter beauties have been grown for their medicinal properties for well over 2,000 years as a cure for gout, paralysis and various other ailments including 'mental disturbances'. The foliar contribution of hellebores is another bonus.

The ideal conditions for hellebores is a cool spot under the middle and outer fringes of deciduous trees in compost-rich, neutral to alkaline soil that is never allowed to dry out in summer. However, from my own experience, they are tolerant of a wide range of soils, and once established can be left to their own devices except during exceptionally long, hot and dry bouts of weather. They can prove very happy at the base of a north-facing wall. Even young plants do not seem to suffer from frost damage. Like so many other plants, it is vital to keep them well watered during their first summer while they are getting their roots down. I always think it is better to play safe when you're introducing a new genus of plant into your garden and to start off with the easiest species first, including the two aforementioned, which are often the most available in garden centres. These include *H. nigra*, so called because of its black roots despite its pure white, sometimes pink-tinged flowers, and *H. corsicus* with pale green flowers.

If grown in an unheated greenhouse they do not tend to flop but rather hold up their heads in cold weather. The only drawback of the hellebore is that their flowers tend to hang down meaning that the full glory of their flowers is hidden from view. A way to fully appreciate them is to cut off their flower very short with scissors and then float them face-up in a shallow dish.

Life continually throws problems at us, the sort of problems for which we are not qualified to know how to deal with. I recently had to go to my brother's funeral,

something for which I was little prepared. I did, however, on that very sad day, catch a glimpse of something that reminded me that life continues and that there is always hope. In a protected sunny corner I saw my very first aconite this year, a flush of buttercup yellow in an otherwise dormant landscape.

The botanic name for the winter aconite is *Eranthis hyemalis*, and it should not be confused with any of the 'monkshoods' (*Aconitum* spp) which produce blue or yellow on tallish stems in late summer. This herald of spring always succeeds in raising our spirits if only to remind us that winter is on the wane and that longer, warmer days are promised. I well remember

visiting the garden some years ago at Tintinhull in Somerset, then tended by gardening guru Penelope Hobhouse,

who encouraged her winter aconites to grow under deciduous shrubs in one of her borders. They had spread into a magnificent carpet because their seed (they are prolific self-seeders) took so successfully in open soil. They will also become naturalised in grass where they do not spread as fast.

It helps to keep a gardening diary but only if you are sufficiently disciplined so to do, in order to remind you to plant aconites this autumn (although they do, like

snowdrops, move happily 'in the green'), this autumn.

There are a number of things we can all be doing now like checking to see if newly planted trees and shrubs have been lifted by recent frosts, in which case a gentle firming around the base of each with the sole of your boot will be in order. Ornamental grasses and those invaluable ground cover epimediums can be cut back hard.

Tender geraniums, allowed to stay dry in their pots over winter (or wrapped in newspaper in a cool place), can be potted up now in fresh compost. Cut them back to healthy shoots and put them on a sunny window sill in a warm room. By the time the frosts are over they will have become strong plants ready for the outside. The beginning of spring is an excellent time to plant broad-leaved evergreens such as rhododendrons, magnolias, *Choisya ternata* and pieris. ■



Pink Spotted hellebore.