

Hellebores- (telohi) Slovenia's gift to the world

By Yul Yost* and Joze Bavcon*

Plant hunters who scour the world for interesting plants invariably visit Slovenia. Two such trips are described in a pair of recent monographs. One is about cyclamen by Christopher Grey-Wilson (*Cyclamen*, 2003) who found around the picturesque Lake Bled in Slovenia a cyclamen which he named *C. europaeum forma Bled*. Cyclamen readily establish themselves by seeds on bare soil and colonize the trenches and bunker remnants from WWI where one author's father, Johann Jost, fought on the Austrian side against Italy. In 2004, author Yost received cyclamen seeds from Slovenia, and planted them in St. Paul, MN where seven years later the plants still grow well. (see picture) While blooming, they emanate a very pleasant, strong aroma. In fact, they can be detected olfactory much sooner than visually; they make very pleasant nosegays. These cyclamens have survived in the St. Paul, MN area the last six winters without protection. Still, especially in the absence of snow cover, it is advisable to cover plants in winter with leaves being mindful of possible damage by mice. Alternatively, if grown in pots, the plants should be kept indoors in a cool place during cold months.

The other monograph is by C. Colston (Cole) Burrell and Judith Knott Tyler, "*Hellebores: A Comprehensive Guide*," 2006. Still another, the most recent one, is by: Joze Bavcon, Klemen Eler and Andrej Susek, "*Helleborus in Slovenia*," 2012; it is a useful book, with numerous pictures and written in Slovenian and English. (It is available for ca. \$25 by contacting the authors or in Cleveland - Felix Gaser at 216-381-2602, or: felixgaser@roadrunner.com.) Both books feature numerous pictures of hellebores growing on the alpine meadows and slopes in Slovenia, where hellebore is known by over 50 different common names, e.g. glavobolka, kurja smrt (evidently, it is toxic to chickens!), tavh, teloh, etc; teloh being the most common. The many names for hellebores may be the evidence that hellebores have grown in the present-day Slovenia for a long time and were known and used by people who lived there and who spoke the Slovenian language. Slovenia is the epicenter of the hellebores. The genus *Helleborus* is now naturally distributed in Central and Southern Europe as far as Western Asia, where it is represented by 15 different species.



Helleb. niger on a Slovenian slope

In Austria where they are known by eight common German names - Lenzrosen being the most common. On the east coast of USA, hellebores were already cultivated by Dr. Hosack in 1811 in the *Elgin Botanic Garden* in Manhattan in NYC on the site of the present-day Rockefeller Center. Dr. Hosack was a known herbalist who grew plants, including the hellebores, for their medicinal use. Also, Maggie Campbell-Culver, (*Origin of plants*, 2001) writes that Romans may have brought hellebore from Eastern Europe to England, where it was first recorded in 1626 and was called setter wort or bear's foot. Moreover, Brian Mathew in his monograph "Hellebores" (1989) also writes that they were brought to England from Austria. We can safely assume here that for these introductions, the plants (more likely as seeds) really came from Slovenia which was until 1918 part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Therefore, in older German literature that area was called Krain or Steiermark, or even Nieder-Oesterreich (Lower Austria). It's only in a recent book (*The Plant Hunter's Garden* by Bobby Ward, 2004) where the territory is called Slovenia. In fact, Ward's book starting on page 210 contains text with numerous pictures of hellebores growing in Slovenia, where they are now sold as cut flowers made into bouquets and posies.

Until about 2005 hellebores were propagated mostly by seeds

and therefore, the plants did not always come true to the parent plant. On the other hand, hellebores are by now propagated by tissue culture or by division and thereby they do inherit the parent-plant characteristics. Such plants have recently become available online. The site www.pineknotfarms.com features a great selection; moreover, for the last 18 years the farm has organized *The Hellebore Festival* which is held on the last week-end of February. Another site: www.sunfarm.com features many thousands blooming hellebores.

In March 2011 the author Yost attended a Cole Burrell's presentation on hellebores in St. Paul, MN to The Rock Garden Club of Minnesota. The presenter enthused the audience and extolled the beauty and ease of growing the hellebore, a perennial plant. They are available in many colors. Named varieties are clones with desirable features, which may be the color of the blossoms, their size, and hardiness of plants to cold, etc. Less expensive are those grown from seeds. They are often labeled a "selection" or a "mix." When grown from seeds, it is best to plant the seedlings in a "holding" area until they bloom. After that, the selected plants can be replanted in a permanent flower bed. There are plenty of choices of plants for USDA Zone 4 or 5 which comprise the "upper" half of USA and include St. Paul, MN.

**Yul Yost is a retired chemist who gardens in St. Paul, MN, where he grows cyclamens, lady slippers and, of course, hellebores. His garden has been on numerous garden tours and is often a venue for picnics for the local Slovenian community. He can be reached at: yulyost@gmail.com*

***Joze Bavcon, Ph. D. is the director of the University of Ljubljana Botanic Garden, which was established in 1810. He authored numerous books on plants, among them two books on cyclamens and the most recent on hellebores. Contact him at: joze.bavcon@botanicki-vrt.si*



Cyc. europaeum forma Bled



Johann Jost Yul Yost's father



Hellebores in a private garden in Orange, Va. (Wall Street Journal)



Posies of teloh in Ljubljana's mart