

167. *HELLEBORUS NIGER* L. (RANUNCULACEAE) — Christmas Rose, Black Hellebore

Ornamental, the pure white flowers sometimes blooming at Christmas. Once supposed to protect cattle from evil spirits, powdered hellebore was also supposed to have been scattered to the breeze by sorcerers to make themselves invisible.

Root, rootbark, or seed used for cancer or indurations, especially of the spleen, tumors, ulcers, and warts.<sup>4</sup> Boiled with red wine and mixed with honey, applied to cancers of fleshy parts. Said to have been used as a purgative in mania (1400 B.C.). Dried powdered rhizome causes violent sneezing. Said to be narcotic. Used as a drastic hydragogue cathartic, cardiotoxic, diuretic, emmenagogue, mydriatic, narcotic, nervine, poison, rodenticide, and vermifuge.<sup>32</sup> In homeopathy, it is suggested for meningitis, encephalitis, nephritis, epilepsy, hydrocephaly, psychosis, melancholy, collapse, cardiac insufficiency, dementia praecox.<sup>2,33</sup>

Contains two poisonous glucosides, helleborin and helleborein.<sup>2</sup> Resin, fat, saponin, and starch are also reported. *Hager's Handbook*<sup>33</sup> lists hellebrin (hellebrigenin-glucorhamnoside) from the herb, kaempferol-3,7-diglucoside, kaempferol-3-sophoroside, and kaempferol-3-sambubioside-7-glucoside from the flowers. Dry seeds contain 21.2% protein, 35.2% fat.

**Toxicity** — Internally violently narcotic; applied locally, the fresh root is "violently irritant".<sup>2</sup> According to Steinmetz,<sup>27</sup> the herb is an acro-narcotic poison in large doses. There are many cases of human poisoning from confusion with other herbs, through consuming the seeds or through medicinal overdoses. Symptoms include dry or scratchy throat and mouth, salivation, nausea, stomachache, vomiting, colic, diarrhea, irregular slow pulse, weak heartbeak, dyspnea, vertigo, ringing ears, mydriasis, disturbed vision, excitement in fatal doses, coronary arrest, and collapse.

**To the physician** — *Hager's Handbook* suggests emesis or gastric lavage, warm towels, spasmolytics for the colic, otherwise as with *Digitalis purpurea*.<sup>33</sup>