

## Viola, Pansy and Violet

What better blooms than violas, pansies and violets to add more colour into our spring gardens? All these lovely flowers belong to the genus *Viola*. The genus is reputedly named in honour of Io, one of Zeus' lovers. To protect her from his jealous wife, Zeus changed her into a white heifer and gave her a field of violets to eat. When the wife saw the little heifer with purple violets in its mouth – such perfect beauty – her suspicion was aroused. She asked him to give her the calf and harassed the poor soul mercilessly until she plunged madly into the Ionian sea, so named after her.

There are over 500 different species, including annuals, perennials, and even some shrubs. Several types are commonly used as garden plants: *Viola x wittrockiana*, the familiar garden pansy; *Viola tricolor*, more commonly known as Johnny-jump-up, love-in-idleness; *Viola cornuta*, the tufted or horned violet, resembles the pansy, but with a smaller flower, its common name horned violet refers to the long, thin, upward pointing nectar spur; *Viola odorata*, the European sweet violet; and the wild blue violet, native to wooded areas and often finds its way to cultivated gardens where it is usually regarded as a weed.

In everyday language, common names such as pansy, viola and violet are often used interchangeably. In horticulture, the term pansy is normally used for those multi-coloured, large-flowered cultivars which are raised annually from seeds and used extensively in bedding, the terms viola and violet are normally reserved for small-flowered annuals or perennials, including the wild species. Violas and pansies are usually treated as annuals, their flowers have a long bloom time, usually from spring through frost in cold regions, and all through winter in warm regions, they are typically used for mass colour in borders and edgings, as covers for spring flowering bulbs, and in containers. Violets are more often used as woodland or rock garden plants.

There are so many varieties and hybrids of violets and pansies that it can be hard to distinguish them. Pansy may be readily distinguished from its relative violas, by the general form of its foliage and its petals. Pansies, generally propagated by seeds, have a more compact growth than violas, the flowers are usually larger with distinct markings or blotches that look like a face, while violas feature more streaking.

Another difference is that pansies usually only have a few flowers at a time whereas violas have smaller flowers but more blooms. The flower petals also differ, pansies have four petals that point upward and one that points downward (two upper overlapping petals, two side petals, and single bottom petal), violas have two petals that point upward and three that point downward. Both flowers come in a good selection of cheerful colours and friendly faces, but pansy has more colour options (red, yellow, orange, pink, white, blue, and violet) and pansy face has been bred into a more circular shape. Typical colours of violas include blue, white, yellow and violet, some are bicolored, often blue and yellow. Pansies are actually derived from violas, so technically all pansies are violas but not all violas are pansies.

Violets produce two kinds of flowers. The first are flowers that rise above plant foliage; they are pollinated and set seeds. The second are inconspicuous, short-stemmed flowers that produce numerous seeds without pollination. Many violets spread by aboveground runners, some reproduce so freely they can crowd out other small plants. We tend to think of violets as herbaceous perennial plants, in fact some are annuals and some are small shrubs. Violets typically have heart-shaped leaves; the shape of the petals defines many species, e.g. some violets have a spur at the end of each petal.

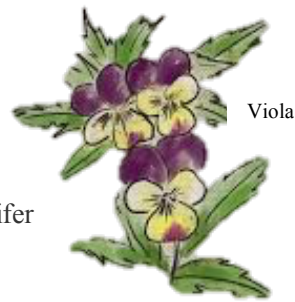
There is now a new hybrid called panola, a cross between pansy and viola. Panolas are quite cold hardy, have higher bloom count of violas and larger bloom size of pansies.

The name pansy derives from the French *pensée*, meaning 'thought'. Pansies go by many other names as well, often poetic or whimsical, including love-in-idleness, heart-ease, three-faces-under-a-hood, johnny-jump-up, herb trinitatis etc. Johnny-jump-ups crop up readily anywhere. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia distributes flowers, remarking '*There's pansies, that's for thoughts.*' Herb trinitatis is dedicated to the Trinity, as each flower has three colours. Love-in-idleness/heart-ease figures prominently in *Midsummer Night's Dream* as a love potion

*Yet mark'd where the bolt of Cupid fell:  
It fell upon a little western flower  
Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound.  
And maidens call it love-in-idleness.*

True violets have been cultivated since time immemorial, their uses were more than ornamental, with flavouring and pharmaceutical applications high on the list. In the language of flowers, a violet signifies fidelity, modesty and love. Violet water and perfume were popular in

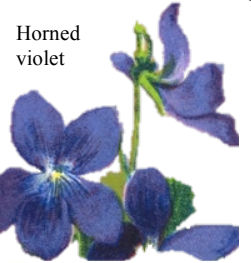
Victorian England. Today some species are cultivated for use in the perfume and cosmetic industry. There is a very sweet French liqueur, flavoured and coloured by sweet violets, called *parfait amour* (perfect love). Some violet and pansy species are fragrant and edible. Confectioners crystallise them to decorate cakes and chocolates.



Viola



Pansy



Horned violet



Sweet violet



Flower power: Decorating cakes with sweet violets