

The East London Garden Society

Plant Facts

The Pansy



Always a popular bedding plant and easily grown in the UK climate, the pansy is not only beautiful but also delicious when drunk as a tea thus utilising its myriad of health benefits.

The garden pansy flower is two to three inches in diameter and has two slightly overlapping upper petals, two side petals and a single bottom petal with a slight beard emanating from the flower's centre. The plant may grow to nine inches in height and prefers sun to varying degrees and well-draining soils.

English common names such as 'pansy', 'viola' and 'violet' may be used interchangeably. One possible distinction is that plants considered to be 'pansies' are classified in the Viola category. Modern horticulturalists tend to use the term 'pansy' for those multi coloured large flowered hybrids that are grown for bedding purposes every year, whilst 'viola' is usually reserved for smaller, more delicate annuals and perennials.

The name 'pansy' is derived from the French word pensée, 'thought', and was imported into Late Middle English as a name of Viola in the mid-15th century, as the flower was regarded as a symbol of remembrance.

In the early years of the 19th century, Lady Mary Elizabeth Bennet (1785-1861), daughter of the Lord of Tankerville, collected and cultivated every sort of Viola tricolour that she could procure in her father's garden at Walton-upon-

Thames, Surrey. Done under the supervision of her gardener, William Richardson, she collected a large variety of plants for crossbreeding.

In 1812 she introduced her pansies to the horticultural world and in 1813 Mr Lee, a well-known florist and nurseryman, further cultivated the flower. About the same time that Lady Bennet was busy cultivating heartsease Lord Gambier was doing the same in his garden at Iver under the advice and guidance of his gardener William Thompson. A yellow viola (*Viola Lutea*) and a wide petal pale yellow species of Russian origin (*Viola Altaica*) were among the crosses that laid the foundation for the new hybrids classed as *Viola Wittrockiana*, named for the Swedish botanist Veit Brecher Wittrock (1839-1914).

A round flower of overlapping petals was the aim of some early experimenters. In the late 1830s a chance variety was found that no longer had narrow nectar guides of dark colour on the petals but a broad dark blotch on the petals. This was developed in Gambier's garden and released to the public in 1839 with the name 'Medora'.

By 1833, there were 400 named pansies available to gardeners who once considered its progenitor, heartsease, a weed. Specific guidelines were formulated for show pansies, but amateur gardeners preferred the less demanding fancy pansies. About this time James Grieve developed the viola and Dr Charles Stuart developed the violetta. Both were smaller and more compact plants than the pansy.

Modern horticulturists have developed a wide range of pansy flower colours and bicolour including yellow, gold, orange, purple, violet, red, white and a very dark purple. Pansies typically display large showy face markings.

Plants grow well in sunny or partially sunny positions in well-draining soils. Pansies are perennial but normally grown as biennials or annuals because of their leggy growth. The first-year plant produces greenery and bears flowers and seeds in its second year of growth. Afterwards the plant dies like an annual because of selective human breeding. Most garden pansies bloom the first year, some in as little as nine weeks after sowing.

Pansies are winter hardy since they can survive a light freeze and short periods of snow but in areas with prolonged snow a covering of dry winter mulch is recommended. In warmer climates pansies can bloom over the winter and are often planted in the autumn. In warmer zones, pansies may re-seed themselves and return the following year. They are not very heat tolerant; warm temperatures inhibit blooming and hot muggy air causes rot and death. In colder zones, pansies may not survive without snow cover or protection from extreme cold or periods of freezing and thawing. Consequently, they perform better in moderate temperatures and equal amounts of mild rainfall and sunshine.

For best growth, pansies should be watered thoroughly about once a week depending on the climate and rainfall. The plant should never be over watered and to maximize blooming, plant foods can be used about every other week depending on the type of food used. Regular deadheading can extend the blooming period. Aphids and slugs enjoy them so the usual methods against these pests are advised.

Pansy downy mildew - caused by a fungus-like organism which produces purple-brown leaf spots, often with encircling yellowing, that have an accompanying grey mould on the underside of the leaf. It can severely weaken or kill affected plants.

Powdery mildew - is a disease caused by one or more species of fungus. Symptoms include violet-grey powder on fringes and underside of leaves. It is caused by stagnant air and can be limited but not necessarily eliminated by spraying, especially the underside of the leaf.

Stem rot - also known as pansy sickness is a soil-borne fungus and a possible hazard with unsterilized animal manure. The plant may collapse without warning in the middle of the season. The foliage will flag and lose colour. Flowers will fade and shrivel prematurely. Stems will snap at the soil line if tugged slightly. The plant is probably a total loss unless tufted. The treatment of stem rot includes the use of fungicides such as Cheshunt or Benomyl, which are used prior to planting. Infected plants should be destroyed to prevent the spread of the pathogen to other plants.

Cucumber mosaic virus - is transmitted by aphids. Pansies with the virus have fine yellow veining on young leaves, stunted growth and anomalous flowers. The virus can lay dormant, affect the entire plant and be passed to next generations and to other species. Prevention is very important so always purchase healthy plants. pH-balanced soil should be used which is neither too damp nor too dry. The soil should have balanced amounts of nitrogen, phosphate and potash.

Other diseases which may weaken the plant should also be eliminated.