

## Home & Garden Resource Guide November 2007

### **Don't Be a Pansy...Just Plant Some**

If you haven't planted pansies or violas during the fall-winter season you're either not a gardener or you've lived in Maryland all your life. *Viola x. wittrockiana*, better known as pansies and violas (*viola tricolor*) are the kings of winter color, blooming from September to June in sun to partial shade and can even be perennial in mild summer climates like the coast.

Pansies and violas have been around as far back as the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and were cultivated by the Greeks. The flowers can be used as garnish and are edible if not sprayed with chemicals. The word Pansy is traced back to the French word 'pensee', meaning thought or remembrance. That's quite a history. Pansies are mounding growers 6-8 inches tall by 8-10 inches wide with 5 petaled flat flowers varying from 2 to 4 inches. Crinkled flowered varieties can also be found on occasion.

Traditional pansies like the Majestic Giants or Colossal series have flowers with dark blotches around the base, such flowers are said to resemble faces. Others like the Crown or Crystal Bowl varieties do not have these blotches and are known as clear face pansies. Two-tone pansies like Beaconsfield have pale blue on the upper petals and purple on the lower petals while Jolly Joker pansies are orange on the upper petals and dark blue or purple on the lower. New pastels varieties Imperial lavender, pink and pink shades add another color dimension. As you can see, so many color combinations are available you could have a different look for the next 30 winters! You can even get black pansies. Ugh!

### **Viola! Viola!**

Violas are smaller versions of pansies growing 3-4 inches tall with flowers up to 1 inch across. The petals are generally separated giving the flower a tri-lobed look (like a Mickey Mouse cap). Old time Johnny-Jumpups with its upright yellow petals over dark purple lower petals is still one of the most popular varieties to this day.

Violas make up in flower size with mass blooms that can cover the foliage. They take lower light conditions better than pansies and can last several years and reseed in the right location. Their slightly mounding cascading habits make them a good choice for winter pots and baskets.

Varieties like the Sorbet and Penny series come in all the same colors as pansies with many being even brighter. Super size violas like the Patiola F1 hybrids rival pansies for size and color plus their increased hardiness.

## **Any Way You Want 'em**

Used in mass for borders or beds and often mixed with complimentary colored snapdragons, pansies and violas provide color even during prolonged periods of fog, a common problem in the central valley. Violas planted over a bed of tulips, daffodils or Dutch iris provide a beautiful carpet of color for the bulbs to pop through. In low 6in. or 8in color bowls they are wonderful as table decorations. Any hanging basket or large pot is a candidate for pansies or violas. Light fertilizing with a water soluble or high phosphorus fertilizer will encourage more blooms. Some people will pick the spent flowers on a regular basis to encourage more blooming but us couch potatoes just plant'em and leave'em.

## **Say When...**

Planting usually starts in October as the weather cools and can continue to spring. People in Shaver or Hume Lake plant spring pansies that last all summer. Late planted (Dec-Feb) pansies and violas may not bloom due to the lack of daylight hours needed by young plants to develop and maintain flowers. Rich well drained soil is a must, adding soil amendments is highly recommended.

## **The Dark Side**

Pansies and violas can get powdery mildew, leaf spot and flower blight on occasion but generally are disease resistant. Over watering or poor drainage causing crown rot fungus is the main reason for loosing pansies and violas; this can be devastation to a flower bed as the fungus can remain in the soil for years. Aphids, sow bugs and snails sometimes attack the leaves, flowers and roots but their activity is more in the fall and spring when the weather is warmer. Cold temperatures down to 20° F. is no problem.

## **Preventative Medicine**

People generally don't wait till they get the flu to get a flu shot. Why wait till your plants have fungus or blights when you could prevent these damaging pathogens by spraying at the appropriate time? Early winter spraying with a product like Monterey Agri-Fos followed by a second spraying in late winter is very effective against diseases like snapdragon rust and pansy crown rot. Camellia petal blight can easily be prevented with a similar application in Nov-Dec. A simple lime sulfur dormant spray or Bayer's All-in-One product after you prune roses in winter can prevent powdery mildew and black spot. There are many plants that could use a protective spray starting in November and again in late winter so don't delay. As always, follow label instructions.

## **Garden Laughter**

**Motion Activated Sprinkler.** Sprays water on dogs or cats as they walk by. Works great until your wife passes by on her way to a luncheon.

**Repel Dog and Cat Repellent.** The smell works great, you'll leave too!

**Sonic Gopher Scare.** The electrical pulses are supposed to annoy gophers and keep them away. A friend tried one; the gopher covered it with dirt! Obviously it was annoyed.

**Cocoa Mulch.** Organic product to keep out snails, slugs and cats. Works great and smells like cocoa puffs. Got Milk?