

at a glance

Common name
sweet violet, Parma violet
Botanical name
Viola odorata and *V. alba*
Besser subsp. *dehnhardtii*
Plant type
herbaceous groundcover
↑ 10cm–15cm
↔ 30cm–60cm
☁☀ shade/semi-shade
🌿 autumn to spring
🪴 good in pots (outside!)



■ suitable

SWEET disposition

Violets love a shady spot in the garden and, although they look delicate, are easy to grow

PHOTO ISTOCK

The scent of sweet violets is one of my earliest memories – not from a plant, but as my Nana's favourite scent in a tiny, hand-painted bottle. The bottle has long gone, but my passion for violets, and that heavenly fragrance, never faded.

There's nothing flashy about sweet violets (*Viola odorata*), but that's part of their appeal. These pretty perennials modestly spread their heart-shaped leaves to cover gaps in garden beds and expect little in return.

It took me 30 years to get around to growing my own sweet violets. I ordered a few plants of *V. odorata* 'Princess of Wales', a typical violet-coloured cultivar with a strong scent, which happily took up residence under a camellia sasanqua hedge. They were well established by summer and survived scorching days, thanks to shade from the hedge and thunderous rains.

I have since been swayed by the Parma violets too, a group of highly fragrant cultivars with an uncertain origin, though it's been determined they belong to the genetic pool of *V. alba* Besser subsp. *dehnhardtii*. I bought just one beautiful specimen – the heady 'Duchesse de Parme' with her distinctive double lavender blooms with white centres.

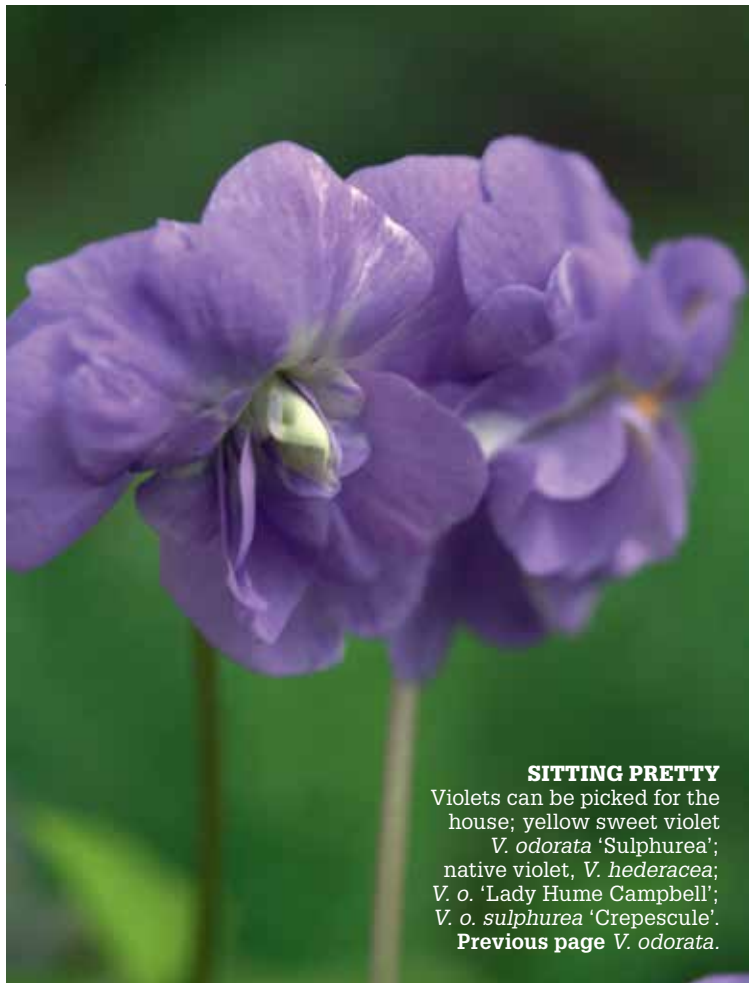
There are some 500 species of *Viola* spp. from around the world. Parma violets were found in the Dolomite mountains in the north of Italy, while sweet violets come primarily from France and England. In the US, they're found in damp forests in the west, and in wet valleys and exposed rocky areas in the east; in Japan and Korea, they grow in the mountains.

V. odorata has many cultivars, with single or double flowers from late winter (or earlier) to spring. The flowers range in colour from lavender to purple, yellow and white and are highly fragrant.

native violets

Australia has a non-fragrant violet, *V. hederacea*, native to the south-eastern states and commonly found at garden centres. Their smaller leaves and flowers look delicate, belying their hardiness. While preferring moist conditions, native violets cope with extended dry periods – they may wilt and look stressed, but when it rains they bounce back as if nothing happened.

I planted a few in a skinny, poor clay soil bed and, a year later, with only occasional watering, they have spread to about 40cm each to cover all the bare ►



SITTING PRETTY
Violets can be picked for the house; yellow sweet violet *V. odorata* 'Sulphurea'; native violet, *V. hederacea*; *V. o.* 'Lady Hume Campbell'; *V. o. sulphurea* 'Crepescule'.
Previous page *V. odorata*.



PHOTOS XXXX. GAP, ALAMY, ISTOCK, SOUTHERNHARVEST.COM.AU

"Sweet violets thrive under deciduous trees, which can often be a difficult spot for other plants to grow"



spots between shrubs. Flowers are white or lavender with a dark centre and appear in the warmer months, but in warm areas, they'll flower for most of the year.

growing tips

Sweet violets thrive under deciduous trees, which can often be a difficult spot for other plants to grow. In the heat, the trees keep the violets' shallow roots cool, and when the leaves fall they receive sunshine, stimulating flowering. They also look good planted under roses, in woodland plantings where bulbs can poke up through the leaves, and in big swathes in larger gardens.

For best results, violets need a moist, well-drained soil – a rich loam is ideal. Plant them 30cm–1m apart, depending on the variety. Once established, sweet

violets self-seed beautifully – sometimes too well. In some areas of Australia they are considered common environmental weeds. They also spread by runners, so you may need to keep them in check.

The easiest way to propagate violets is by dividing plants. You can also grow them from seed, but one supplier I spoke to, Pauline Beaumont, says seed only forms in the right conditions, and collecting it is a real challenge: "It must be done by hand, and this is done on one's knees and in the afternoon, from 3 to 5pm."

Sow seed in the cooler months in very good quality seed-raising mix. Place it on top of the mix and cover lightly. Germination can take from seven to 30 days. Plant out when the plant has second and third leaf development (about 7cm tall) in a well-prepared bed.

Once flowering, use a liquid fertiliser formulated for flowering plants, or a combination of fish emulsion and seaweed extract, to encourage lots of quality blooms.

pests & diseases

Pet-safe snail pellets have kept snails and slugs at bay in my garden, but there are other threats, depending on where you live. Aphids on the underside of leaves can be controlled with soap sprays. Wallabies and possums enjoy both the flowers and leaves. A liberal spray of smelly fish emulsion may help to deter them, or try sprinkling a little chicken manure or blood and bone.

There's no doubting the longevity of violets, both with gardeners and as faithful garden plants. So if you are looking for a low-care groundcover for those shady areas or an easy-to-grow plant for yourself or the kids, remember violets. I always look forward to picking my first tiny bouquet of the year, breathing in that timeless scent and remembering my dear Nana. **GA**

Please see page 68 for events that are celebrating the 100th anniversary of Violet Day.

where to buy

Violets are available at specialist nurseries, including The Diggers Club, Vic (diggers.com.au), Beautanicals Australia (seed), Qld (australiangardener.com.au), Garden Express (gardenexpress.com.au), Lambley Nursery (lambley.com.au), Lynn's Rare Plants, NSW (lynnsrareplants.com.au), Nutshell Perennial Nursery & Plant Farm, NSW (nutshellnursery.com.au) and Woodbridge Nursery, Tas (woodbridgenursery.com.au).

SIX FAVOURITES

- **'Crepescule'** Soft, apricot-coloured flowers. Named for its similar colouring to the rose of the same name.
- **'General Herrick'** (syn. 'Governor Herrick') Large, purple, sweetly scented flowers on long stems.
- **'Lady Hume Campbell'** Double, lavender-mauve, intensely fragrant flowers.
- **'Princess of Wales'** Large, violet-blue, strongly scented flowers.
- **'Rosina'** Delicate, lilac-pink flowers with a sweet fragrance.
- **'Swanley White'** (syn. 'Conte di Brazza') Double white Parma violets with strong perfume.

