

VERSATILE VIOLETS

By Shirley Froehlich, BSA

What do the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Napoleon Bonaparte have in common? They all had a great love of violets. And they weren't the only ones. Herbalists used violets extensively from the sixteenth century on to treat many ailments. Butterflies like them too. Violets are the only food plants for the beautiful orange and black Fritillary butterflies. I often see Fritillary butterflies in my garden. Our prairie violets are popular with customers too. Is it their small size that endears them to gardeners or their adaptability to sun or shade? Maybe it is because their flowers appear in May when many other plants are just starting to show a few green sprouts. Whatever the reason, violets are a great plant for prairie gardens.

DESCRIPTION

Violets generally begin blooming in May and continue into June. Many species have darker veins on the flowers that act as arrows pointing the way for pollinating insects to a nectar laden spur at the rear of the bottom petal. They have two kinds of flowers: early spring flowers which are showy and cross fertilized, and summer flowers which remain closed and self fertilize (cleistogamous). Seed is produced by both types of flowers in dry, three part capsules which pop open with some force to scatter the seed. If you wish to collect seed you must do so before the capsules pop. The seed will be ripe when the capsules are pointing up in the air or straight out rather than hanging down.

I am currently growing five varieties of violets native to Manitoba.

Early Blue Violet *Viola adunca* is the smallest of the group. It grows only 5-10 cm tall (2-4"). One of these violets simply appeared in my flower bed one year, courtesy of the neighbourhood birds I think. I have had several people tell me that they have many of these violets growing in their sparse and shady lawns. Perhaps some of these plants were started courtesy of the birds too. The leaves are ovate and grow along the stems. The plants can grow to 30 cm across (12"). They will self seed prolifically in moist, bare soil but they are much more restrained in sunny, drier conditions.

Northern Bog Violet *Viola nephrophylla* has a different growth habit. The plant has no stems and all the leaves are basal, arising from the crown. It is mound shaped and 10-20 cm high (4-8"). Early leaves are round and later ones are broadly ovate. Masses of blue/purple flowers are produced every spring. This species also spreads by self seeding in moist, bare soil.

Crowfoot Violet *Viola pedatifida* is another blue/purple violet of the Canadian prairies. It generally starts blooming in early June, a few weeks later than the first two species. The plants do not produce as many flowers as the Northern bog Violet, however, the flowers are larger. The deeply indented "crowfoot" shaped leaves give the plant its name. The leaves are all basal. Because of their leaf shape they are rarely noticed in the grass until the flowers appear. This variety also spreads somewhat by self seeding.

Downy Yellow Violet *Viola pubescens* is a good plant for shady, moist growing conditions. It grows 15-30 cm high (6-12"). The leaves are about 6 cm (2 1/2") and broadly ovate with heart shaped bases. The bright yellow flowers grow on stalks from axils of stem leaves. They self seed easily.

Western Canada Violet *Viola canadensis* is the tallest of the group, growing 30-60 cm tall (1-2 ft). This common violet of woodlands across Western Canada is often called Wood Violet. It is loaded with large, white flowers that have purplish veins near the centre. The heart shaped leaves on long stalks are about 7.5 cm wide (3"). This violet spreads easily, both by seed and by roots and is very good for part or full shade. Moist soil is preferred but it tolerates dry shade fairly well.

NATIVE HABITAT

Early Blue and Northern Bog Violets are very common violets that grow in all parts of Canada except Newfoundland and Labrador. They are also native in all parts of the U.S. except the south east and the coast.

Crowfoot Violet grows from Ontario to Alberta and in the Midwestern U.S.

Downy Yellow Violet is native to all of eastern Canada except Newfoundland and Labrador and it goes west to Saskatchewan. It also grows in all of the eastern U.S. except Florida and west to Texas. In Manitoba it is found in the eastern Parklands and south eastern Boreal forest.

Western Canada Violet is native all across Canada except Newfoundland and Labrador and Nunavet. It also grows in most of the northern U.S. and the southeast. It is very common in shady woodlands throughout the Prairie Provinces.

CULTURE

Early Blue and Crowfoot Violets prefer medium to moist soil and full sun to part shade. Crowfoot Violets may be short-lived if grown in deep shade and rich soil. Northern Bog Violet does best with moist to wet soil in full sun to part shade. Downy Yellow and Western Canada Violets are woodland species preferring shade with moist, rich soil. Any of the three blue/purple species can be planted in groups in flower beds or small spaces or mixed with other wildflowers and grasses to create a prairie meadow. The two woodland species can be used to naturalize a wooded or shaded area. If you plant woodland wildflowers under trees instead of trying to maintain a lawn under the trees you won't have to rake the leaves in the fall because the leaves are great mulch for the wildflowers. They will grow up through the leaves in the spring.

You can set plants out in the garden in spring after the danger of frost is past or in summer. If growing your own plants from seed indoors, the seed needs to be stratified for six weeks. Then, a cool location with temperature of 10-15 degrees C. (50-60 F) is needed to give the best germination for Early Blue and Northern Bog Violets. The others are trickier to germinate. They seem to require very cool temperatures for germination. I generally seed the trays in summer and leave outside for the winter. They germinate fairly well in spring while it is still very cool. Another way to propagate them is to transplant seedlings that have sprung up in the garden, either in spring or in fall.

Violets are so versatile. They can enhance any garden, sunny or shady, wet or dry. Who can resist a plant that starts blooming when all the rest are just starting to grow?

Shirley is the owner of Prairie Originals, a nursery specialising in wildflowers and native prairie grasses near Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. www.prairieoriginals.com