



Pansies and Violas



Pansies and violas are not only beautiful; they are also signal that spring has arrived. The pansies and violas we grow today have been greatly improved over the past decade. Now there are dozens of colors, color combinations, sizes of blooms and even some distinctive plant habits and improved winter hardiness. Traditionally, pansies were either bold solid colors or the blooms had faces (a splotch of contrasting color). Color choices have now expanded beyond yellow, orange, red, blue and white into some delicate shades of pink, gold, primrose, yellow and lavender.

Pansies and violas both are related. In the Cincinnati area, pansies are grown as annuals. Violas can be either perennial or annual, depending on the hardiness of the specific variety. Violas tend to be more heat tolerant and hardier than pansies. If you are looking for perennial violas, often referred to as violets, be sure to read the tags and do a little research to make sure that variety is hardy..

When can I start planting pansies in the spring? Pansies and violas are very cold-tolerant plants. Grown outdoors and acclimated, they will easily handle temperatures down to the mid 20°s and keep on blooming. If the temperatures drop any lower, the existing flower buds are usually damaged, but the plants live on.

What does "acclimated" mean? Just like people, plants need to get used to cold (or hot) temperatures gradually. Plants that are grown outdoors develop naturally as the temperatures warm. To get an early start, we grow the pansies indoors and move them out as soon as the temperatures are warm enough. These plants need to be exposed to the cold gradually to toughen them up. We call this technique "acclimating."

If the pansies I buy (or grow) aren't already acclimated, how can I do it? First of all, ask where you buy your pansies if they have already been acclimated. Plants sold from a greenhouse probably are not acclimated. But some garden centers will keep them outside whenever temperatures allow and only move them in on the coldest nights to protect them. Those plants are already acclimated. If you buy pansies straight out of a greenhouse, set them outside in their original containers for at least a week. The first few days, bring them in when the temperatures drop below 40°. The next few days, leave them out down to freezing. After about a week, they should be acclimated and you can plant them where you want them. If the long range forecast is for moderate temps, you may want to risk planting them out directly. Just be prepared to cover them if the weather changes. .

There are many different varieties on the market, so many that a choice can be rather difficult for the gardener. If planted in the fall hardiness is the main concern; if planted in the spring heat tolerance is important to consider. We grow the Delta series, which is both very heat tolerant and winter hardy. Other varieties we include are the Dynamite series, Acquerelle Mixed, and Colossus Mixed. The Dynamite series has a very high rating for heat and weather tolerance, and the Colossus as the name implies has huge 4" blooms in an array of bright colors. The Acquerelle Mix, which was developed in Italy has a wide range of unusual pastel colors.

What type of setting do pansies need? Ideally, pansies and violas like lots of sun in the spring and early summer, but they tend to struggle with too much summer heat. A great setting would be one that gets full sun before the trees are fully leafed out and dappled shade during the summer. They do their best in rich, organic, well-drained soil. Heavy rains and saturated soil will usually destroy pansies.

Can pansies and violas be used in containers? They are perfect for that purpose. Not only will they make a great planter by themselves, they combine well with other early spring bloomers such as sweet alyssum and snapdragons. Tucking a few into a summer mixed planter will give you some early color while the summer plants are filling out.

Why did my pansies stop blooming so early in the season? Pansies are cool season annuals. As the summer gets warm, their blooming slows down. Deadheading (removing the spent blooms) will encourage them to bloom longer. You can also try cutting them back to within a few inches of the ground when it gets too hot and they may fill back out and begin blooming again in fall. Pansies also profit from regular feeding with a water-soluble fertilizer high in phosphorus. To keep pansies compact, be sure they receive strong light and stay well fertilized.

During the last few years, there seems to be many pansies available in fall. Select the hardier sorts of pansies. The Delta series is very hardy. Larger flowering varieties do not tend to be as hardy. Make sure that they are in a well-drained location, but at the same time keep them well watered up to the time the ground freezes. What damages pansies in our area during the winter, is not the extreme cold temperatures, but the heaving out of the ground as the soil freezes and thaws. Some protection is best for pansies to survive. Naturally, this will occur with a good snow cover, or else you can put evergreen boughs over the beds to protect them. Never use straw or leaves. Pansies do very well in fall, often blooming right up until the snow covers them up.