

Pansies

As the leaves begin falling, and our flowers start to fade away, many gardeners put their gardens to bed for the winter months. The idea of months without flowers seems a waste, especially when we can have an outstanding display of color from pansies all winter long. So instead of ending your gardening for the year, begin your winter gardening with a planting of pansies.

Pansies, *Viola X Wittrockiana*, come in a variety of sizes, colors and types. They come in blues, reds, yellows, white, orange, pink and purple. There is even a black variety. There are solid colors without faces, to bi-colors with contrasting faces, to blended colors, giving you a mix of colors in each bloom. Intense breeding has developed flowers that can get as large as four and a half inches across, on lovely green foliage. It is hard to believe that these large, brightly colored flowers are descendants of the quiet, diminutive woodland violets.

Flowers

The flowers have a velvety texture and bloom over a long period of time. They also last quite well as a small nosegay or bouquet indoors. To keep the plants blooming, be sure to dead-head -- remove spent flowers as they decline. Pansies thrive in cool weather, and will bloom for you from now until hot weather causes them to decline next summer. Plant them in a well-drained location with moderately rich soil. They will grow in full sun to partial shade. Those in full sun will fade away sooner in the summer, but by then you have plenty of other plants to replace them with.

Planting Times

People who move here from further north, are usually amazed to see pansies being planted this late in the season. Arkansas is about as far north as they can be planted as a winter annual. Cooler climates plant them for an early spring bedding plant. We're fortunate to have them for a longer season. Even when the weather does get extremely cold (for us) they will freeze solid, then thaw out when the sunlight hits them, and continue to bloom all winter. When so much of the garden is dormant and somewhat homely, pansies give a much needed shot in the arm of cheerful color.

Pansies can be planted from late September through November. When planting late in the season, be sure to choose strong, healthy plants with blooms or at least buds on them. If you plant young, small plants during the later planting, you may wait until spring for good flowers.

Varieties and Colors

When it comes to varieties of pansies the list continues to grow each year. Some of the most common classes of pansies include Majestic Giants, which are one of the largest classes of flowers, and the first pansy to be awarded an AAS -- All American Selection. Almost all varieties in this series have the traditional dark blotch or face, and they come in blue, purple, white, yellow and red. The Crystal Bowl series of pansies are bright flowers which are clear colors (without faces or blotches). The flowers are smaller, but there are lots of them--these plants are very floriferous. Colors range from white to yellow, true blue, rose, orange, violet and a scarlet color. The Crown series of pansies are also clear colors with slightly larger flowers ranging in color from orange, red, white, yellow and blue.

Some unique types of pansies include the Imperial Antiques which give soft, blended colors. Each flower changes subtly from opening to maturity. Another interesting series is the Joker series. One interesting combination is Jolly Joker F2 Hybrid, it combines an intense orange lower petals with a deep purple (almost brown) upper petals. The Joker Light Blue has an outstanding flower with a light purple outer color with a white band leading to a dark purple blotch. The list could go on and on, with new intense shades and mixtures each year. Go visit your local nursery and see what is available that you like.

Pansies can be planted in a mix of colors, or for a really dazzling display, in a single color. Plant the individual plants four to six inches apart. Mass them together wherever possible. They make a great companion planting for spring flowering bulbs. Simply dig up the bed, plant the bulbs first, cover them with soil, then plant the pansies on top. The spring bulbs will come up right through the pansy plantings for even more color in the spring.

Container Plantings

Pansies also make ideal container plantings. If you live in an apartment or condominium, don't think that you are excluded from planting pansies. Plant a container full for your deck, patio or front porch. Regular watering will need to be included in their care -- even when it is cold. It is especially important prior to a heavy freeze. They don't need to be saturated, but they do need to be moist.

Fertilizer Requirements

Fertilize pansies regularly all season long. Fertilize at planting and during any warm spell throughout the winter. They respond well to blood meal, but several gardeners have also attracted wild animals to their pansy plantings by using it. If you want to use blood meal, incorporate it into the soil lightly. Be careful not to be too heavy handed, since it is a high nitrogen fertilizer. Any commercial fertilizer will work well also.

Pests

Very few pests attack pansies, with the main culprit being the rabbit, and occasionally squirrels. Use whatever resources you have to deter them, although a light scattering of blood meal has been known to do the trick.

And They Are Edible Too!

Pansies are not only a wonderful bedding plant, but are also edible as well. They are used in salads, and are crystallized and used as decoration on cakes. If you decide to nibble on your pansies, make sure that they have not been sprayed with any pesticides before doing so.

A gift of pansies is supposed to mean "you occupy my thoughts" since pansy, comes from the French *pensee* -- meaning a thought, and heart's ease. Fable has it that the pansy was originally white but was colored purple by Cupid.