

Pansies

Botanical Bytes by Bruner

By Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 9-10”
Foliage Width: 9-10”
Flower Height: 9-10”
Foliage Color: Green
Flower Color: Assorted
USDA Hardiness: Annual
Moisture: Low-Average
Light: Full Sun – Part Sun



Pansies have a long and interesting history. They are genetically bred from violas. Many of the hybrid pansies of today came from a lineage of *Viola tricolor*, *Viola lutea*, and *Viola altica*. These genetic parents came from Europe and a few adjacent countries. Genetic breeding originated in the early 1800s by an English gardener named William Thompson.

The dark green foliage and a virtual rainbow of color choices for the flower make the pansy an easy choice for winter color in the garden. In southern locations a minimum of one-half day of sun is plenty for flowering. As gardeners move farther north or the winter gets colder, pansies can easily handle a full day of sun. Pansies enjoy well-drained fertile soil; if your beds are marginal or have poor drainage, remember to amend the soil before planting. Pansies will appreciate light fertilizing during the warmer parts of the winter to encourage growth and flowering.

The whimsical and wonderful pansy goes by many different names around the world. In Scandinavia, Scotland, and many countries where German is the primary language, it is known as Step Mother Flower. Italians call them the Flamola or Little Flame. A few other colorful names are “Three Faces Under a Hood,” “Flame Flower,” “Jump Up and Kiss Me,” “Flower of Jove,” and “Pink of my John.”

There are many intriguing tales about the history of the pansy, but my favorite concerns how the pansy lost its fragrance. It has been said that pansies were originally very fragrant and grew wild in fields and forests. A German fable colorfully tells how pansies lost their fragrance. It was said that the fragrance was so wonderful that people would trample the grass of the fields in their eagerness to pick the pansies. This led to a problem because the local cows then had nothing to eat, because the grass had been trampled so badly. Seeing this problem, the delicate pansy prayed to give up her perfume. Her prayers were answered and her fragrance disappeared. The numbers of people coming to the fields dropped because the flowers were not as fragrant. This allowed the field grasses to grow tall and the local cows to grow fat, thus resulting in a sad but happy ending.

Gardeners who enjoy a multi-purpose garden will appreciate the fact that the pansy is edible. All parts of the flower are edible. The flowers may be candied, used in salads, or possibly as decorations on cakes. The actual taste of the pansy flowers varies depending on the soil conditions in which they are grown. Flavors are said to range from mildly tangy to minty. When consuming any plant, always make certain to avoid plants recently treated with pesticides.

The pansy is an old-fashioned, beautiful standby of the winter garden, with a rich history of colorful legends and fables. Whether you are looking for a durable addition to your garden, a unique discussion piece for friends, or to brighten up your cooking, the pansy is an excellent choice for any winter garden.