

Growing Guide: Pansies

Fascinating Facts

- Pansies are available in an amazing array of colors — perhaps the most of any common garden plant. Flower colors range through the spectrum, including red, orange, yellow, blue, violet, bronze, and even a deep purple that appears nearly black.
- Some pansy varieties are a single color and some are multi-color. Some have dark lines radiating from their centers, and some have blotches of contrasting colors.
- The flat, open blooms and intriguing markings — viewed with a bit of imagination — conjure up a sweet floral face.
- The Victorian era (mid 1800s) saw the rise in popularity of “the language of flowers,” in which different flowers (and flower colors) carried symbolic meaning. Pansies symbolized thoughts (e.g. “my thoughts are with you”).
- Pansies were popular in Victorian-era tussie mussies — small bouquets of colorful and/or sweet-scented blooms and fragrant herbs. They were carried in part to offset noxious odors caused by unsanitary conditions and infrequent bathing.
- The types of flowers in a tussie mussie were of utmost importance, as each represented one idea that, combined, conveyed a message to the recipient.
- Pansy flowers are edible. The colorful blooms can be sprinkled over salads, used to garnish savory dishes, or bring an artisan’s touch to cakes and sweets. (Curious about [edible flowers?](#))



From Weedy Wildflower to Beloved Bloom

Large-flowered pansies, as we know them now, don’t exist in the wild. They were bred over the course of many years (and breeding work continues today). The starting point was in the early 1800s in Surrey, England, when Lady Mary Elizabeth Bennet collected and cultivated *Viola tricolor*, a wildflower native to Europe and western Asia. We know it as Johnny jump-up; another common name is heartsease, referring to a belief that a tincture of the plant could ease a broken heart.

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Some consider Johnny jump-ups (and other *Viola* species, such as the common violet) to be weeds, especially when they infiltrate flowerbeds and disrupt a sea of manicured lawn. Children know better, and most appreciate the sweet little purple-and-yellow flowers with two rounded petals on top (Mickey Mouse ears!) and tiny, radiating lines (whiskers!).



Years of crossbreeding *V. tricolor* with other *Viola* species led to a number of distinct varieties, which Lady Bennet introduced to the horticultural world in 1812. Further hybridization ensued, and eventually the large-bloomed bedding plants were given the name *Viola* × *wittrockiana* (named for the Swedish botanist Veit Brecher Wittrock). They've earned a place in the hearts of gardeners everywhere.

Cool Characters

Pansies prefer cool temperatures. In northern regions with cool summers, they're planted in spring and may flower all season long, until a freeze in late fall kills the plants. In hot-summer/mild-winter climates, pansies are often planted in fall, and they'll bloom all winter into spring, until rising temperatures cause the plants to flag. Sometimes they'll reseed themselves.

When flats of blooming pansies show up at local garden centers, their irresistible jewel-tone blooms belie the plants' hardiness. In the north, their appearance in spring signifies that winter is over and, although more chilly air is sure to come, pansies can take the chill. In warm climates, their appearance announces that it's time to pull any bedraggled, heat-weary flowers and replant with these fresh-faced blooms.

Hardiness

Pansies are a good example of how the hardiness ratings system can be deceptive. Some resources list them as hardy in zones 4-8; others, zones 7-10. There are a few reasons for this:

- The common name pansy is used to describe many *Viola* species, as well as the many hybrids. These have differing hardiness ratings.
- Many types have fairly exacting climate requirements. For example, they may be reliably perennial only in regions with relatively mild winters and cool summers.
- Most large-flowered hybrid pansies can take a light frost but not hard freezes. Proper mulching or reliable snow cover can allow the plants to overwinter.
- The hardiness map doesn't account for heat and humidity. Blooming slows in hot weather, and the plants get leggy and may wither.

Even under ideal conditions, individual plants may live for just a few years. Because of all these variables, most gardeners purchase young plants in 6-packs or flats and treat them as annuals.

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Starting From Seed

Although it's possible to start pansies from seed, it requires patience. Plan to sow the seeds about three months before your last frost date. Sow the seeds on the surface of moist, fine-textured seed-starting mix, and then press on the seeds to ensure good contact with the soil. The seeds need darkness to germinate, so place the tray or flats into a black plastic bag at room temperature. The seeds should germinate in about two weeks. Once they do, place the plants under grow lights.

Transplanting

Whether you started from seeds or purchased plants, you'll want to harden off the seedlings before setting them into their permanent outdoor home. Start the process about a month before your last frost date. Bring the plants outdoors to a sheltered spot for a few hours, and over the course of about 10 days, give the plants increasing exposure to sun and wind.

Once the plants are fully hardened off, they're ready to plant. Pansies grow best in rich, moist soil. They like part to full sun and appreciate some shade during the hottest part of the day.

In the landscape: The low-growing plants are ideal along walkways and in massed plantings in front of taller plants and shrubs. They also merit a spot in the vegetable garden, for the flowers are as edible as they are beautiful! Before planting, amend the soil with plenty of compost.

In planters: Fill containers with fresh potting mix amended with compost and a slow-release granular fertilizer. Fertilize regularly to encourage continual blooming.

Water soil as needed to keep it moist but not soggy. Deadheading (removing spent flowers) isn't absolutely necessary, but doing so will prolong the blooms. If summer heat causes flowering to cease, cut the plants back by half, continue to water, and you may well be rewarded with a second flush of blooms in fall.

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