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# From the Garden - Pansies and violas reveal roots with a little digging

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Children love them for their little "faces." We gardeners love them for their color and ease of cultivation.

And everybody loves the show they put on here in the winter. "They" are pansies and violas. Where would we be without them brightening our gardens, planters, patios and decks on even the dreariest winter days?

I was a little hazy about the origins of this garden favorite so consulted the Internet and discovered that they have been around in one form or another for thousands of years.

For instance, at <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/plantanswers/flowers/pansies.html>, a service of the Texas Cooperative Extension, I learned that violas were familiar to people living in Greece in the 4th century B.C.

Some time later, an acute observer noticed a plant similar to a viola ... and named this plant a wild pansy. The word pansy is traced back to the French word "pensee," meaning thought or remembrance.

According to the same Web site, in the early 1800s an English nobleman, Lord Gambier, and his gardener, William Thompson, began crossing various viola species until Thompson found a bloom that no longer had lines of dark color on the flower but huge blocks of color on the lower petals called the "face." Discovered in 1839 and named "Medora," this pansy and its progeny became popular with gardeners and breeders throughout Europe.

Today we can find hundreds of different species of pansies and violas. So for advise about which to select, I called Dee Ivey of The Plant Place, 6114 Market Street, where they have a large variety available.

All those for sale at this store are suitable for our area so I asked Ivey to make a few recommendations: "Matrix", a large pansy with a face, has largely replaced "Majestic" "because it blooms earlier and has a stronger, longer lasting bloom," she told me. "Then there's 'Crown,' a large solid-color pansy, and 'Delta' which has lots of blooms per plant and comes in several colors."

When it comes to colors, this winter-time favorite can be found in all the colors of the rainbow "and then some" said Ivey. Even blue. If you don't believe me about the blue, try "Azure" or "True Blue" (Carolina fans will like that one).

If it's fragrance you are looking for, there's "Yellow Delight" viola and others. And did you know that all pansies and violas are edible? So you can add them to winter salads for extra color and flavor.

Most people seem to like the large, splashy pansies, and I can see why as they do put on a good show, but my favorites (and Dee's, too, it seems) are the violas. These dainty little plants are so easy to grow, don't need deadheading, and will take some shade. Besides which, they are just so cute. Ivey's suggestions among violas include "Sunny Royal," a yellow with a purple lip, and "Citrus Mix," a popular bright orange with yellow.

Prices here average \$15 a flat, "and they are real chunky plants" says Ivey. They also carry 6" pots at \$2.25.

The Plant Place, who grow their own, provided these cultivation tips for pansies and violas:

Both can be planted in the ground, in planters, hay racks, even hanging baskets.

Most pansies grow best in full sun but violas will do just fine in some shade.

Make sure the area has good drainage.

Mix Black Cow or Metro Mix in the soil before planting.

Plant in groups for more impact

After planting, add a fertilizer made specially for pansies. Dee and I agree that pansies and violas are pretty hungry plants so if you are using a regular liquid fertilizer, once a month would not be too much.

For repeat blooming, deadhead frequently (except violas, which don't need it).

Now I ask you, what could be easier? They come in so many wonderful colors, are easy to cultivate, can be fragrant and are even edible. No wonder we love pansies and their diminutive cousin, the viola.

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