

Rediscovering the Elegance of Pansies

Unlocking the Potential of an Underrated Flower



BY BRENN A ESTRADA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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“Then there are Pansies, delightful things in a room, but they should be cut in whole branches of leafy stem and flower and bud. At first the growths are short,... but as the season goes on they grow longer and bolder and graduate first into bowls and then into upright glasses.”

—Gertrude Jekyll, *Wood and Garden*. London: Longmans, Green, 1899

When you hear the mention of pansies, what is the first image that comes to mind? Is it the red, yellow, or purple pansy with the familiar dark blotch? Do you think of compact, dainty flowers that shyly peek up at you from under robust perennial shrubs? Or, perhaps you are reminded of the countless weathered terracotta pots that overflow with pansies and violas every spring outside small corner cafes and local hometown hardware stores? That is certainly what the pansy has come to be known for; I imagine there are few who remember them otherwise. But, the pansy once filled a far different role in floristry, and it was neither small nor shy. Not to take away from its exceptional role in cooler months as a reliable filler flower, but the pansy is long overdue for both recognition and reclamation as a beloved cut flower.

As the saying goes: All pansies are violas, but not all violas are pansies. The genus *Viola* accounts for all pansies, violas, and violets. The garden pansy, *Viola xwittrockiana*, is a cross between *V. tricolor* and *V. lutea*. While many commonly grown violas are a cross between the garden pansy and *V. cornuta*. *Viola cornuta* it-

self is also a popular type of viola to grow. I have been growing pansies and violas as cut flowers for years here in the Pacific Northwest, trialing over one hundred different varieties every year while doing so. With particular growing techniques and a bit of extra care, I have enjoyed great success in consistent blooms from March through November and long-stemmed pansies, which are ideal for cutting from June through October.

While not every growing zone will allow for such an extended growing pe-

riod, it is possible to grow pansies almost everywhere for at least a portion of the year. For example, in climates with intense heat and drought, you will likely find it much easier to grow them in the late fall, winter, or early spring.

Pansies are currently being grown for cut flowers by flower farmers all over North America including the Pacific Northwest, Midwest, and East Coast, as well as some warmer regions like California, Arizona, and Texas and colder regions like Alaska and Canada. Pansies are very possibly the most inclusive flower there is due to their adaptability and perseverance in so many climates and spaces. They can be grown by the smallest of apartment dwellers with room for only a few pots, yet make a reliable crop when grown on a large scale.

Additionally, pansies and violas come in one of the broadest ranges of colors of any flower in existence, from vibrant claret red to burnt autumn orange, honeycomb yellow to antique gold, and sepia olive green to soft cornflower blue. Pansies even bloom in shades of chestnut, sienna, and mahogany brown, as well as the deepest of jet and coal black. As for purple, there are few flowers



Above: An illustration of *Viola tricolor* by Walthar Otto Müller showing long trailing stems from the book *Köhler's Medizinal-Pflanzen*, 1887. **Opposite:** Several varieties of black pansies in a Frances Palmer vase.



“Those who have not used these flowers for cutting have lost sight of one of their best virtues.... They have little or no value when the flowers are picked off singly, all the natural beauty of the flower is lost. But when the shoots with flower and foliage are cut of sufficient length they are very beautiful.... I have had them stand in a vase from ten to twelve days... they will stand a week and even look well in a warm room.”

—Ernest Thomas Cook, ed. *Sweet Violets and Pansies from Mountain and Plain*. London: Country Life; George Newnes, 1903



Left: Sweet peas provide stem support for a variety of pansies. **Above:** *Viola cornuta* ‘Tiger Eye’ features dramatic veining and heavy fragrance.

who do purple as well as the pansy. If the sheer range of color isn't enough to impress, there is an abundance of textures and patterns that support the pansy as a true work of natural art. Splashes, streaks, and ripples, with veining, penciling, and pooling—it is not uncommon to find several fantastical colors artfully brushed across the petals of one singular flower. Pansies may present themselves with smooth circular edges, unruly ruffles, or the most elegant of waves along their petals. There really is no other flower like the pansy.

GROWING PANSIES

It's well known that pansies can tolerate some shade, and they certainly do favor it when it protects them from the afternoon scorch, but the best bloom size and color is actually achieved when they are grown in a full day's sun, particularly 6 to 8 hours. Additionally, it is the summer heat that draws out their stems, allowing them to reach lengths suitable for beautifully constructed arrangements, hand-held bouquets, and my favorite use—filling a beautiful vase at home.

To keep them happy in full sun, you need to take care of their roots. This is achieved by encouraging their roots to stretch down, ideally 6 inches or more, where the soil remains cool and damp. It is important to never let pansies dry out, and how you water them is key. Slow, deep waterings will encourage the roots to stretch down where they will be happiest, whereas frequent short waterings will cause the roots to rest just below the surface. The more shallow the roots, the more likely they will dry out. A rich, loamy, well-draining soil is preferred if you really want them to thrive.

For pansies to reach the summer season still full of vitality, and especially if growing them for cut flowers, continuous deadheading is quite necessary. Although it can be time-consuming, I find the time I spend deadheading my pansies genuinely calming and restorative. As pansies and violas are edible, you can use those freshly deadheaded blooms as wonderful accompaniments in pastas, soups, and salads. Some varieties are also richly fragrant. Entirely different from the sweetly scented violet, certain pansies and violas actually smell



'Black Prince' with long sturdy stems.

Sources for Pansy Seeds

Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company, rareseeds.com
Johnny's Selected Seeds,
johnnyseeds.com
Three Brothers Blooms,
threebrothersblooms.com

like warm chocolate, a fragrance that is truly unforgettable. The variety 'Tiger Eye' is one of the most heavily fragrant and a personal favorite of mine.

SUPPORTING LONG STEMS

The natural trailing tendency of the original *V. tricolor*, from which the garden pansy was derived, is still present in many varieties of pansies today. Yet, it has come to be common practice to remove pansies from the garden once they become drawn out in early summer and replace them with other flowers that are just entering into bloom.

For decades, pansies have been hybridized to remain as compact as possible, and pansies are often treated with plant growth regulators, such as Daminozide, to further aid their compact growing habit. Because of this, not all varieties of pansies make good cut flowers, and where you buy your starts from is certainly a factor. I, personally, do not prefer the traditional pansy, with the solid primary colors, dark blotch, perfectly circular proportions, and short compact foliage. The pansies I am most drawn to are the ones that possess traits of the early wild violas and French fancy pansies of the mid- to late 19th century, with fantastical colors and patterns, ruffles and waves, varying shapes, and trailing stems. Luckily, these are usually the varieties that make the best cut flowers.

When growing pansies as cut flowers, I have found it's always best to start from seed. The trick is to train them to grow upwards, rather than outwards, so that the trailing stem becomes a long, sturdy stem perfect for cutting. The best way to achieve this is by planting them very close together, no more than 2 to 4 inches apart. Additionally, growing them in raised beds with a soil level at least 4 inches below the sidewalls will

add further support and encourage them to reach upwards. I see consistent stem lengths of 10 to 16 inches when grown in my raised beds. Alternatively, pansies also do very well when grown among companion plants. They will climb up alongside and within the branches of roses and look especially beautiful paired together. The pansies I grow among my roses and other taller companion plants often reach heights of 16 to 24 inches. They can also be grown along trellises with plants like sweet peas and will use such structures for support accordingly.

HARVESTING TIPS

When cutting pansies for long stems, you want to harvest them at the first joint near the base of the plant. This is the same place you would cut the pansy back to allow them to send up new growth, so by cutting at this point, not only do you allow for the longest stems possible, but you are at the same time prepping the plant for a rebloom if you want to try to grow them as perennials. Cover the remaining plant base with a couple inches of good compost, and keep them well watered, and you should see new growth in just a couple weeks.



'Chianti Mixed'

GROWING PANSIES FROM SEED

Start your pansy and viola seeds approximately 12 weeks before your last frost for spring and summer flowering or mid-summer for fall planting and overwintering. Pansy seeds will keep best when stored in a 40-degree Fahrenheit cooler or refrigerator. They do not need to be pre-chilled, but they will last much longer when stored at this temperature between sowings.

Sow 1 to 3 seeds per cell on the surface of the soil and cover them very lightly, if preferred, with soil or vermiculite to keep seeds from shifting during watering and to retain moisture in the soil. I, personally, do not cover my seeds as I have found they germinate quicker on the soil surface without any covering. Use a humidity dome, if possible, and place them somewhere between 60 to 68 degrees until germination is achieved. It is vital that the seeds never dry out, so if you do not have a humidity dome, take special care in checking the surface of your soil regularly.



Pansies thrive when their roots are cool. After germination, I move mine promptly into my greenhouse with a small heater to keep the temps from dropping below 45 degrees F. I've found they have the hardest growth when temperatures are consistently around 50 to 55 degrees. Additionally, if you are sowing seeds in midsummer for fall planting, it's important to note that germination will cease entirely if temps are consistently above 70. Take care to germinate them in a climate-controlled space accordingly depending on the time of year.

Water often, as pansies love cool, damp soil that their roots can stretch down towards. If you find your pansies are leggy, they are likely not getting enough light. Although pansies can be happy with some shade, they do

need ample light—a minimum of 6 full hours of sunlight each day to thrive.

Transplant seedlings into the garden a few weeks before the last frost depending on your USDA Hardiness Zone. They are quite hardy and can withstand a few mild frosts and even snow. I usually transplant mine out when they reach about 1 inch in height and have 4 true leaves.

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Just as not all varieties are suitable for cutting, not all varieties do well re-blooming after being cut back, but it is always worth giving it a try. Always cut your flowers in the morning, and be sure to place them in fresh, clean water promptly after cutting to rest for a few hours before arranging them. Pansies last quite long in a vase, and buds will continue to bloom once cut. A fresh-cut bouquet will last well over a week as long as you change the water frequently. I once had an old marmalade jar filled with pansies on my kitchen window sill, where I could see and smell them often. The pansies lasted over a month, as not only did the buds open but new buds continued to form. If I had to sum

When harvesting pansies for cut flowers, cut the stem at the first joint near the plant's base.

up the pansy in one statement, it would be to never underestimate all that this undeniably marvelous and all too often underrated and overlooked flower is capable of. ■

*Brenna Estrada is a flower farmer who has built a dedicated following through the sharing of her extensive collection of pansies. Her book, *Pansies*, will be available in March of 2025 from Timber Press.*

