

A facelift for pansies

To show off the range of pansies and violas now available to buy and grow in different situations, the RHS staged a mass planting last October

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Pansies and violas could be described as horticultural Marmite; for some, they are well-loved plants that provide winter and spring interest in gardens. For others they are an unfashionable choice, often associated with poorly planted bedding schemes.

The RHS Plant Trials team wanted to counter these negative thoughts, so more than 10,000 large-flowering F₁ pansies (mostly *Viola x wittrockiana* cultivars) and smaller violas (hybrids of garden pansies and other species such as *V. cornuta*) were planted last October at RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey by members of staff and volunteers.

Until April or May you can see them

The striking dark red and golden yellow blooms of *Viola Sorbet Ruby Gold Babyface* (right) brighten up any garden in winter.



RHS staff, volunteers and Horticultural Trades Association members all helped with the pansy planting at Wisley (above). Trailing and semi-trailing types (right) were planted in hanging baskets.



flowering in the Top Terrace beds and by the Hillside Events Centre in containers, baskets and in the ground.

The key to growing pansies and violas lies in when they are planted. The best time is during autumn, when the soil is still warm, allowing roots to establish, which in turn helps plants withstand winter weather better and bloom readily in spring.

The plants were donated by several British nurseries to display their latest

flower range, and to demonstrate that the choice of pansies and violas is larger than expected.

Changing market

The wide selection of pansies and violas is a result of the resurgence in demand for bedding plants more generally through the year. There have been improvements in breeding across most types of plants, with many offering a higher

resistance to pests and diseases.

Pansies and violas tend to be sold by names referring to flower colour rather than cultivar names; for example several with Series names, including Cello, Delta and Sorbet. All Series have a yellow-with-blotch and blue-with-blotch. Gardeners also distinguish plants by flower size. There is not a set size per category, but generally large-flowered selections (pansies) are about 7–9cm

(3–3½in), multiflora types are roughly 4–7cm (1½–3in) and viola flowers are usually 3–5cm (1¼–2in).

There are now also several series bred specifically for hanging baskets, so it is important to recognise their distinctions in order to get the best displays: Endurio Series violas are semi-trailing types, heavily scented with a prostrate habit; Friolina Series violas can trail up to 60cm (24in) long by May, but they require more

Pansies and violas

moisture and feeding compared to others; Balconita Series are grown from cuttings rather than seed so the flowers are more uniform in colour. They are also said to have a better habit as they do not grow too long.

These trailing examples can be found in the hanging baskets opposite the Hillside Events Centre, alongside triangular beds of selections suitable to grow in the ground. There are more yellow-and-black pansies planted than other types, because this is the most popular colour combination and every breeder will supply it.

Among the yellow pansies, be sure to look for strikingly coloured 'Power Sherry' (Power Series), an interesting blend of yellow and pink with dark red blotches. Good, too are purple and white Sorbet XP Coconut Duet Improved ('Pas786647') (Sorbet Series); sky-blue Delta Premium Pure Light Blue (Delta Series); and deep purple Sorbet Ruby Gold Babyface ('Pas211763') (Sorbet Series).

On the Top Terrace, pansies from the Delta Series have been planted with hyacinths, around box spirals or in stone urns. While this may resemble more traditional bedding schemes, by March this area will be a mix of sweetly scented, rainbow-coloured blooms that will surely convert any pansy pessimist. ●

More from the RHS For more information enter 'Pansy' or 'Viola' in the search box at www.rhs.org.uk

From the range of smaller-flowered violas



Sorbet XP Yellow Frost ('Pas912440') (Sorbet Series) Compact bedding plant with fragrant blooms. Said to flower throughout winter under reasonable conditions.



Endurio Yellow with Violet Wing (Endurio Series) Pretty, semi-trailing viola, ideal for hanging baskets and containers. Flowers are in bloom from December to May.



Sorbet Blueberry Cream ('Pas211786') (Sorbet Series) Small-flowered bedding viola, which has the RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM). Propagate by seed in late winter or early spring.



'Velour Purple and White' (Velour Series) Classed as a large-flowering viola or a small-flowering, compact pansy. Best grown in containers. Also holds an AGM.



'Allspice' mixed Prolific trailing viola suitable for baskets and containers. A mixture of five different colours, each with a different scent. Flowers from September to March.



Delta Pure Deep Orange (Delta Series) A multiflora pansy, with large upward-facing blooms in flower from autumn, during winter (if mild) and then spring. Best grown in the ground.



Balconita Deep Red (Balconita Series) A British-bred pansy, grown from cuttings to ensure colour and uniformity. Compact in habit. Stems do not grow long and fall over.



'Supreme Rose with Blotch' (Supreme Series) Another multiflora pansy, similar in characteristics and habit to Delta Pure Deep Orange (left). Best grown in the ground.



Delta Premium Pure Light Blue (Delta Series) Large, upright-flowering blooms. Compact in habit so ideal for containers and growing in the ground.



Yellow blotch types Striking blooms and the most popular colour sold by nurseries (blue blotch is another top seller). See mass displays of Delta Series growing on the Top Terrace at Wisley.