

A HOME & GARDEN *Guide*

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Garden Tales

Going wild over violets

By Susan Yost

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Violet mania? Yes, it did exist! In the early 1900s, in the U.S., a sweetly scented European species was one of the most popular corsage flowers, with a thriving violet industry centered in Rhinebeck N.Y.

A related species, the common blue violet (*Viola sororia*), appears in our lawns in springtime. Although it's seen as a weed by some, I see it as an intriguing wildflower.

Native to the eastern U.S., this violet has some wonderful and not-well-known characteristics. Did you know that there are two types of flowers — the well-known colorful "open" ones (known to botanists as chasmogamous flowers), and others that remain closed and have no petals but produce many seeds?

You can start looking for these cleistogamous now, after the colorful flowers are gone, and through the summer. The thin dark lines on violet petals act like an airplane runway to guide insects to the nectar down in the center of the flower. Not all violet



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Violets are perennials that grows year after year from an underground stem.

species are violet (blue) in color; some are white or yellow, or combinations of these three. The common pansy is also in the violet genus, *Viola*.

Few people know that violet seeds are ejected forcibly, traveling up to an amazing 15 feet from the plant. Try putting your face close to one of the small tan fruits and you may get hit by a flying seed as it's squeezed out of the drying fruit.

Knowledge of the botany of the common blue violet can

help even those who still see it as a weed and would like to remove it from their lawns. It's a perennial that grows year after year from an underground stem, which explains the persistence of these plants even after mowing (the underground stem is easily removed).

Did you know that violets are edible? The young leaves and flowers make a nice addition to salads. Violet flowers can be candied, or frozen in ice cubes and used in a punch. Even if you choose to look instead of nibble, the beauty of the flowers alone should make you wild about violets.

On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call Dr. Susan Yost at 857-6452 to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.

Editor's note: Susan Yost is an educator at the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium at Delaware State University.