



## Flowers for Winter Months: Pansies

by Sue Rideout, Master Gardener

Pansies are a wonderful flower for our winter gardens. With their cheerful bright faces they can light up a foggy winter landscape. My pansies line the walk to our front door and never fail to lighten my mood.

Part of the *Viola* genus which includes violets, violas and pansies, they are technically considered perennials but are grown as winter annuals in our area. Modern pansies were cultivated from Heartsease (*Viola tricolor*) in Europe. These wildflowers are known as Johnny Jump Ups in the United States. The flower we know as pansy is a hybrid: *Viola x wittrockiana*. The name “pansy” comes from the French word for pensive because of their resemblance to a thoughtful human face.

The pansy flower consists of two upper slightly over-lapping petals, two side petals, and one bottom petal with a slight beard coming from the center of the flower. The blossoms are two to four inches in diameter in yellow, gold, purple, red, white, and even black (very dark purple). They are often bi- or tricolor with large showy face markings. The plants are erect, 6 to 10 inches high, with shiny oval or heart-shaped leaves.

Pansies are very hardy, surviving freezing temperatures even in their blooming phase, but are not very heat-tolerant, they die out in the summer sun. In the Valley, they are best planted before the first frost and removed at the arrival of summer heat. Pansies can be started from seed in middle to late summer and planted out in the fall. Many varieties are readily available in six packs and flats at local nurseries (attesting to their great popularity) for setting out.

Varieties of pansies are extremely numerous. Clear Sky and Delta strains have no blotches or other markings; Contessa has ruffled blossoms. Majestic Giants have up to four inch blooms. The Universal Plus series of 21 cultivars covers all pansy colors except orange and black. Since the young plants in nurseries usually have a few blooms, choosing your favorite is pretty easy. I



Viola flowers (Johnny Jump-ups)



Pansy flower



Pansies in bloom in late winter - early spring

usually plant flowers in banks of a single color, but with pansies I love to have a mixture for winter viewing pleasure!

Pansies enjoy fertile loose soil and full winter sun (at least six hours). In the garden plants should be spaced six inches apart but can be planted closer in hanging baskets or pots. The soil should be kept moist, but not soggy; bottom watering is best if possible. Spent flowers should be plucked (dead headed) to keep the plants blooming.



Pansy garden trials in California

Pansies are subject to a few diseases, most fungal in nature. Root rot can stem from soggy soil; leaf spot is associated with cool damp springs. Most fungal problems can be controlled with judicious watering, good air circulation, or in some cases with a fungicide. Snails can also be a problem, solved by hand-picking or snail bait.

Pansies have many uses in the garden other than as eye candy. They have a nice fragrance, particularly the yellow and blue shades. These versatile flowers are edible, high in Vitamins A and C. The petals can also be used in dyes. Good companion plants are winter kale and snapdragons as a taller backdrop. A cheery winter flower garden can give a great seasonal boost.

January 19, 2012