

No-fuss pansies for long winter color, minimum care



This easy-care plant makes a strong impact in landscapes across the country in fall, winter and early spring.

■ Pansies, *Viola x Wittrockiana*, are perennials that are treated as annuals. The plants have a small, rounded habit with rich green foliage. They can be massed in large or small beds; planted as borders or groundcovers; and potted in planters or tubs (Table 1).

Pansies offer a long bloom period, are disease- and insect-tolerant, and need little care. Breeders have been developing plants that are heat- and cold-tolerant and blossoms that come in a wide range of colors and sizes.

Depending on location, they will bloom for two to three months in the fall and again in the spring. They can take a light frost and continue blooming.

"They're coming on again (in spring) before landscape crews can get out and work the beds for other plants," says Doug Badgero, greenhouse and gardens manager

at Michigan State University.

In the South and West, pansies are planted for fall-through-spring blooming. Summers are too hot for the plants to survive.

In the North and Midwest, pansies are hardy in the fall and can be planted as soon as holes can be dug in the springtime.

In northern locations, pansies planted in spring may "rest" (not bloom) during

TABLE 1.

WAYS TO USE PANSIES

- * In fall plantings to provide: a cover crop on bulb beds through winter
- * spots of color to accent the established shrubs and trees
- * continuous color through the winter in mild climates
- * In mass plantings for large areas.
- * In borders with other winter crops.
- * In long, narrow planting strips along roadways, driveways and building entries.
- * In rock gardens or as a groundcover.
- * In containers, whether alone or as an accent with other plants.

◀ The universal series of hybrid multiflora pansies provide good fall, winter and spring color.

(Photo by Kurt Reynolds, Goldsmith Seeds)

the heat of summer and then re-bloom in the fall.

Trials at MSU have shown how fall-planted pansies can be overwintered in the landscape to be one of the first spring blooming plants, Badgero says.

Fall planting—Pansies planted at the right time will provide long-lasting plants and blossoms (Table 2). The general rule is to plant at least four to six weeks before the first frost, Badgero says.

Landscape professionals should be sure the pansies planted have been acclimated to the outside temperatures in their part of the country.

Daily temperature extremes are hard on pansies. Avoid planting them in locations that get warm temperatures and long sun exposure during the day and extreme cold temperatures and frost during the night.

Pansies bloom best when planted in full sun, but many do well in light shade, too.

They prefer rich, moist organic soils, as most annuals do; however, Joe Seals of Ball Seed Co. says he has seen pansies grow in heavy clay Texas soils. Clay or sandy soils should be amended with compost and/or peat. "They are not fussy plants, but remember that the lighter the soil, the more water and fertilizer they will need," he said.

The soil for pansies should offer good drainage. "They (pansies) don't like it (soil) real wet," Badgero said. Long periods of moisture can cause root rot.

TABLE 2.

FALL PLANTING TIMES

- * North - September 15
- * Midwest - October 1
- * South - not before October 1
- * Southwest - October 1 to October 15
- * Southeast - October 1 to October 15
- * Florida - December 1
- * California - anytime

For instant color, use pansies grown in four-inch containers. For smaller jobs, cell packs may be used; however, remember that root systems typically are less developed and may take longer to become established in the landscape.

A guideline for spacing plants is 9 to 12 inches. For instant mass color, plant 6 inches apart. Spacing more than 15 inches apart is not recommended because plants generally do not grow large enough to fill the space.

In the North where the before-freeze growing period is short, Smith recommends planting "good and tight for best show." He grows in 3 1/2- and 4-inch containers, and plants them pot-to-pot for mass color.

Dig planting holes slightly larger than the rootball. Pansies should be planted at the same depth as they are growing when purchased. After planting, gently firm the soil around the base of the plant and water thoroughly.

Selection and care—Pansies are simple to care for. Natural moisture is usually enough, and they shouldn't need fertilization. Mulching, however, is recommended.

To encourage more blooming of pansies growing in small beds, maintenance crews could deadhead the flowers manually.

TABLE 3.

SIZES OF PANSIES

Miniatures: Pansies with the smallest size blossoms are called violas or johnny-jump-ups. The tiny-faced, fragrant blossoms are used mostly in residential landscapes and in container plantings.

Small-flowered: With a flower size of approximately 2 inches in diameter, these pansies produce a continuous flush of color with multiple blooms. Mass plant in beds, 6 to 8 inches apart, for best show of color.

Mid-size: These pansies provide a good flush of color with a slightly larger flower, approximately 3 inches in diameter. The flowers are held above the foliage for best color show. They are good for fall and spring color. Many also are bred to flower under the short days of winter in mind climates. Space plants 8 to 10 inches apart.

Large-flowered: While these pansies have flowers 4 inches and larger in diameter, they are not as floriferous as many smaller varieties. They require more dead-heading for maximum flush of color.

In some southern sites where overnight temperatures can drastically change, polypropylene covers can protect the plants. In the North, some landscapers cover plants with hay.

Landscapers have many choices as to size, color and with or without faces. The selection of colors in recent years has shifted toward solid colors as mass plantings.

Regardless of the variety selected, landscape professionals across the country can count on this easy-care annual to provide long-lasting color in fall and spring.

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TABLE 4.

PLANTING TIPS

Soil:

well-draining, rich, organic mixture

Light:

mostly sunny to part shade sites

Fall planting:

4 to 6 weeks before first frost

Spacing:

6- to 12-inch centers

TABLE 5.

OPTIONAL MAINTENANCE

Water:

supplemental irrigation during dry spells or in dry climates

Fertilizer:

one-time application during growing season

Grooming:

manually remove (deadhead) spent blossoms

Overwintering:

cover with landscape fabric when temperatures plummet

Factors to consider when choosing wood

Outdoor structures, which landscape managers must by necessity deal with, have to be weather- and insect-resistant. So only certain woods are suitable for this environment.

Cedar, redwood and pressure-treated woods are the three types of durable woods most often recommended. Georgia-Pacific lists the attributes for these landscape woods:

Cedar

Used for decks, walks, fences.

- Noted for its beauty, durability and resistance to decay.
- Ranges in color from a light cream tone to a deep cinnamon red and in texture from knotty to clear.
- Resists shrinking, swelling, warping.
- Easy to work with.
- Weathers well without applying a protective finish, but exterior finishes such as water repellents, stains and bleaching oils will enhance its resistance to decay.

Redwood

Used for decks, fences, furniture.

- Can range in color from a tawny tone to a deep cinnamon red, and in texture from knotty to clear.
- Highly favored as decking material because of its classic color and grain, as well as its resistance to decay.
- Easy to work with.
- Weathers well without applying a protective finish. Exterior finishes such as water repellents, stains and bleaching oils will enhance its resistance to decay.

Pressure-treated Southern pine

Used for decks and fencing.

- Pressure treatment forces a preservative into lumber, making it resistant to insects and decay.
- The lumber has a distinctive pale green tint which, if left unstained, will weather to a rustic gray.
- Finishes well. While staining or painting is not necessary, it is often desired for cosmetic purposes. Applying a water-repellent sealer over the wood is recommended.
- Because it contains chemicals, pressure-treated wood requires special care in handling.
- Considerably less expensive than cedar and redwood.