

GROWERTALKS

Columns

7/31/2017

In Praise of the Lowly Viola

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If someone calls you a “pansy” they probably don’t mean it as a compliment. They’re likely implying you’re weak or overly sensitive—not altogether different from the recent use of the word “snowflake.” At least in the case of the pansy, they should have chosen a different plant. *Hydrangea macrophylla*, maybe—wilty in the heat and flower buds zapped by the cold. Joy. If I wanted a foliage plant, I’d have planted a heuchera, thank you very much.

Unlike most traditional annuals who toast or mush at the first sign of frost, pansies are at their best in the frosty shoulders of the “growing season” here in the mid-Atlantic. A pansy planted in the landscape here in September will look good at least through November and again from March into June. Sure, the flower party stops and the foliage cringes when temps dip into the low 20s, but as soon as temps warm a bit, the flower show is back and bigger than ever.

They’re also a good fit in our production. Saunders Brothers came to annuals (and perennials) via the nursery route. Pansies grow well in pine bark, are fine with a watered-down version of our perennial PGR program, and they’re not especially picky if you keep the pH low and feed relatively heavily. We grow in old school hoop houses right on the ground. We don’t have any benches let alone heated benches and I’d give my eye teeth for a ridge vent. As such, we don’t grow points or Easter lilies and we only grow as many mums as we can make money on, which isn’t very many. Pansies fill the gap between the last of our traditional summer blooming annuals and the first spring plantings of those same plants the following year. Thanks in no small part to fall pansies, I’m tighter on space in the fall than I am in the spring and ensure every house flips at least twice a year.

Pansies are great for landscapers, too, though I imagine it’s hard to rip out begonias and vinca in their late-season prime. Fall pansies offer an important seasonal change out, and since they look good into June, they buy some time for that spring install. Deer are a challenge (that thin black bird netting is nearly invisible from a distance) and they suffer from some of the same root issues as petunias if pH gets high, but that’s controllable.

But ... as much as I love pansies (*Viola x wittrockiana*), they aren’t even the best viola for fall. That award goes to *Viola cornuta*, which are simply (and a little confusingly) referred to as “violas” by most people. In our seasonal display beds, these little guys have consistently outperformed pansies, but they’re largely

overlooked by buyers due to small flowers. Big-flowered pansies are in—Majestic Giants, Mammoths, XXLs, Colossuses, Humongouses and Ginormouses (those last two are made up, I think). My challenge with the ginormous flowered varieties is all of their flower power is tied up in a few blooms. If you lose just one of those flowers to botrytis, freeze or shipping damage, you've lost a significant portion of your flower power. With dozens of flowers per plant, if a “viola” loses a few flowers, you'd barely notice, and from 20 ft. away the flower power of your run-of-the-mill yellow viola will compete with—and often outdo—the average Ginormous Yellow. For us, violas also rebloom faster after a weather event than pansies.

Less cold sensitivity, better rebound bloom and greater total flower power even at highway speeds, but don't take my word for it. This is the August issue, which is planting time for viola growers and a month (or more) ahead of planting time for landscapers. If you're planting pansies, find a spot to trial a few violas to see for yourself how much they rock the landscape. **GT**

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