



VIOLETS VIOLA ODORATA AND HEARTSEASE VIOLA TRICOLOR

There are many varieties of sweet violet, with flower colours varying from violet to the uncommon pink and white. Heartsease also varies in colours. All belong to the Violaceae family, including our native *V. hederacea* but beware the spread of the Victorian form. The 2 local Sydney violas are much more polite.

The perfume of sweet violets at this time of year is most appealing, especially when picked as they as they last well in a vase. All violas are useful ground covers and easy to grow. The sweet violet is a hardy evergreen rhizomatous herbaceous ground cover, reaching a height of about 4-6 cm. To flower well violas need morning sun and a calcareous, well composted moist soil. As violas spread they need to have their annual runners trimmed back, rather like strawberries. Rabbits, snails and red spider mite like their leaves.

The natives of northern and southern Europe were favourite flowers of the ancient Athenians. Homer relates how the Athenians used violets to "moderate anger", while Pliny recommended wearing a garland of violets to prevent headaches and dizziness.

Heartsease was used in love potions, hence the name. The Chinese used a similar species *V. yedoensis* in similar ways. This same viola has also been used successfully with other herbs to treat severe childhood eczema at a London hospital.

Medical researchers have found that violet leaves are possible blockers of random cell production through protein material interference.

Violets assist the Lymphatic system (the body's sewage collection 'pipes'). Many cancers are caused by the mind, through our conscious and unconscious beliefs/thoughts, and the effect of

mind on body. Sweet violet leaves can assist in clearing blocked lymphatics and through that process the mind (thinking) process improves. However, do not eat violet leaves randomly, as too many can give you diarrhoea. No more than 4 leaves a day, was Dorothy Hall's recommendation. Personally I find 4 violet leaves are a useful addition to my salads. They are beneficial for the lungs.

Up to 1924 violet leaf tea was listed to be used for cancer of the throat. Violets can still be recommended after lung and breast surgery to help prevent the development of secondary tumours.

Some people use violet leaf tea for sore or dry throats, coughs, or hoarseness and chest congestion.

The aerial parts (leaves and flowers) of both violets and heartsease are eaten or taken as an infusion for nervous strain, both physical and mental exhaustion. Many women find that violets are helpful at reducing hot flushes at menopause, and older people find they assist with incontinence.

Others apply a poultice of violet leaves directly to the skin to cool inflammation, or as a skin cleanser, or for cradle cap.

The culinary decorative use of violas has long crystallised the flowers for cake decoration. The addition of sweet violet and heartsease flowers to salads and fruit salads can also be most attractive.

This is a most useful plant well deserving of a place in the garden, if only for the perfume.

Notes prepared by Janet Fairlie-Cunninghame, with acknowledgement to personal communication from Dorothy Hall.

Also with reference to Penelope Ody, MNIMH The Complete Medicinal Herbal, Viking 1993.

