

Cultivation Notes

#2 March 1988

Birdfoot Violet, Pansy Violet

Viola pedata L. var. lineariloba DC. A Rhode Island Native Plant Family VIOLACEAE by Betty Salomon

Viola pedata var. lineariloba is one of our most beautiful wild flowers. In May you can find this low-growing native plant in large patches along the country roadsides in sandy, acid, infertile soil. If you can match these conditions in sun or light shade while keeping out competing plants, the Birdfoot Violet is a good candidate for a place in your garden. Its finely-cut palmate leaves are quite different from the rest of the violet family. The flower has five petals, the upper two dark violet and the lower three lavender in var. pedata, all five petals lavender in var. lineariloba, the common form in Rhode Island. There seems to be great variation in the size, shape, and color of this plant.

Birdfoot Violet was transplanted to my sunny garden from a field on our property many years ago. It is now well established and is seeding itself nearby. Happily for the Birdfoot Violet most of our soil meets its requirement for barren conditions. Other than trying to give the plants the same conditions under which they were growing in the wild, I have little experience with the propagation of this species, so all of the following cultivation notes are taken from the literature. I inquired among some of our other members, and didn't get much help there either. When I asked Doris Anthony if she had had any luck with the Birdfoot Violet, she answered, "No, but my rabbits did!"

Helen Lusi wrote a note saying she hadn't had luck transplanting it onto her property, but she sent along the following information from Blanchan's Wild Flowers Worth Knowing:

"In shale and sandy soil, even in the gravel of hillsides, one finds the narrowly divided, finely cut leaves and the bicolored beardless blossom of Viola pedata. Pale bluish purple on the lower petals, dark purple on one or two upper ones and with a heart of gold. The large velvety, pansy-like blossoms and the unusual foliage which rises in rather dense tufts are sufficient to distinguish the plant from its numerous kin. This species produces no cleistogamous or blind flowers. Frequently it blooms a second time in autumn—a delightful eccentricity of this family. The spur of its lower petal is long and very slender, and, as might be expected, the longest-tongued bees and butterflies are its most frequent visitors. These receive the pollen on the base of the proboscis.



CULTIVATION NOTES

Viola pedata L. var. lineariloba DC

Birdfoot Violet

Perennial. Blooms in May, may reflower in autumn. Found in full sun to filtered shade in bare patches along roadsides and edges of fields in well-drained, sandy, and infertile soil.

Seed Collection: The seed matures shortly after flowering (1-2 weeks). Watch carefully and try to collect it just before the capsules split open. The seeds should be light brown in color. Sow immediately or store in a closed, labeled jar in the refrigerator until the following late winter or spring.

Propagation

<u>From seed:</u> Fresh seed may be sown directly in the garden where it is to grow. If you are successful, seedlings will appear in the following spring and flowers the next year.

Seeds that have been stored in the refrigerator should be planted the following February-April, by sowing in a sandy, gritty mixture, such as one part Jiffy Mix (or equivalent) to four parts sand, a fast-draining mix. The general rule is to sow seed on the surface, covering lightly with sand. Leave in flats as long as possible. The New England Wild Flower Society recommends enclosing seed pots in a plastic bag and keeping in the refrigerator for 90 days, then transferring to a warm place for germination. That would make a mighty crowded refrigerator at my house, so I usually sow seeds in February or March and place them outdoors in a coldframe or sheltered spot. This means that you have to remember to bring your seeding mix into the house in the fall before everything is frozen.

From cuttings: Lift a healthy plant after flowering. Slice through the crown and rootstock vertically with a sharp knife, leaving some feeding roots attached. Place in a sandy bed, keep moist, and new leaves will start to emerge in August. The rooted cuttings should be transplanted to pots to continue their growth.

Cultivation

Do not add humus or fertilizers. The secret for this plant appears to be a light, poor but well drained soil in sun or filtered shade. Several sources advise removing your good garden soil and replacing it with sand or a gritty mix before planting Birdfoot Violet.

KEEP RECORDS and keep RIWPS informed. The more sources of information we have, the more we will learn about how our native plants make the transition into our own gardens. And remember, don't take plants from the wild: take them only from your own properties you have permission to dig on. GOOD LUCK.

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Illustration by Nina Williams.