

The Under-Rated Wild Violet

During the York County Master Gardener MAEscapes Native Plant Sale held earlier this year, I was inspired to hear a home gardener inquire about wild violets in her garden and if she should allow them to remain. I was delighted to hear it. A convincing persuasion can be made as to why the under-rated wild violet (*Viola sororia*), known as the Common Blue Violet, or the Woolly Blue Violet, or the Meadow Violet, or the Hooded Blue Violet, should be included in the landscape.

First – a confession. Previously, I was a home gardener who eradicated wild violets from my garden. I had little regard for wild violets and treated them like any other weed. It was not until I discovered a couple caterpillars grazing upon them, that I realized their real value.

As it turns out, wild violets (*Viola sororia*), are beneficial. Most importantly, wild violets are useful to pollinators. The Violet Andrenid Bee is a pollinator specialist exclusively to wild violets. Other visitors include Mason bees, Halictid bees, skippers, Syrphid flies, and other insects. It is also a host plant as caterpillars of many Fritillary butterflies feed on the foliage, including the Variegated Fritillary, Aphrodite Fritillary, Meadow Fritillary, Silver-Border Fritillary, and Diana. The plants also serve as food for some birds: wild turkeys, bobwhites, and mourning doves, and some mammals.

For humans, wild violets have held cultural, medicinal and culinary purposes. Four states claim the wild violet as their state flower: Illinois, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin. Poets and playwrights have used violets as symbols of modesty in their works.

Blooming starting early in March and April, wild violets bring some of the first color to an otherwise dreary flower bed or lawn. They are one of the earlier indicators of Spring's arrival and are unmistakable with their heart-shaped leaves and delicate purplish-blue flowers. Returning yearly, they are a native perennial plant to eastern North America, growing only 4 to 6 inches high. They are frequently found in areas such as stream banks, woods, and fields. In developed areas, they can be found in lawns, city parks, moist waste areas, and along hedges and buildings.

There are several forms of wild violets with different colored flowers. Earlier in the year I happened upon a hillside of white flowers and upon closer inspection, realized that they were violets. These plants had grayish white flowers with pale, purple centers. Research revealed that these are called *Viola sororia priceana* (Confederate violet). The common name, Confederate violet, refers to the flower's resemblance to Confederate uniforms during the Civil War (pale, greyish blue).

While some people consider wild violets to be a weed due to their hardiness and persistence, sometimes they are purposely grown. They can be cultivated in the landscape and work well in wildflower gardens, native plant gardens, or naturalized areas. When blooming ends, the plant's foliage continues to have value and can be used as small-scale ground cover for areas along walkways or under shrubs.

If you are considering adding or keeping wild violets in your landscape, there are a few things to consider. Wild violets prefer part sun and medium moisture and grow into attractive clumps. They are moderately low maintenance and will tolerate wet soil, clay soil, and being planted near black walnut trees. The root system consists of underground, horizontal rhizomes that can form colonies of wild violets. Later in the summer, self-pollinating flowers form seed pods that perform mechanical ejection and disburse seeds. Wild violets can be controlled by digging, making sure to remove the entire root, which

includes the seed-bearing capsules at the soil's surface. In lawns, a sharp knife can be used to remove the plants.

As fall begins, it is a good time to consider including wild violets in the landscape. By including native plants such as these, home gardeners benefit many species of wildlife and can help create a healthier environment. Ultimately though, it is a home gardener's preference to include the petite, under-rated wild violet.

Krista Callear is a Master Gardener in York County. Master Gardeners are volunteers for Penn State Cooperative Extension. For more information, contact the Master Gardener office at 717-840-7408 or YorkMG@psu.edu.