

A Rainbow of Violas: How to Add Tiny Delights to Your Garden

By **Erica Jakeway** November 30, 2024

When I started gardening, I began with an empty mulch bed. The freedom to fill it with anything and everything was both liberating and overwhelming. I realized quickly on my very first project that learning from others would lead me to my best results. Thus began my newest obsession, reading everything I could about plants.

To design a border around a house, you start with the big, structural plants in the back. Height and massive color make the quickest impact. As you watch that journey unfold, a couple of things become evident. First, those big, colorful plants often do *not* display the same way at all times of the year. Second, there is *always* room to add small plants in the front. These two revelations lead me to a passion for violas.

Most people have encountered violas multiple times. They can be found in neighborhood gardens, city plantings, or plants lining shelves in the garden center. They can go in the ground but also are snuck into hanging planters or pots arranged by nurseries. Their compact and dainty size even make them workable in window boxes. Have I caught your attention yet? There's even more that make these plants a winner.

Small, but Mighty

Violas are perfect for the front of the border, reaching only 6-8 inches high and wide. If their small size did not add to their versatility enough, they are almost more impressive due to their hardiness. Their ability to handle the cold gives them not just one season of color, but three! These results are tied to your garden zone, based on the temperatures where you live. Hot climates will notice a decline or dormancy in the summer, whereas cold climates with freezing temperatures will notice dormancy in the winter. Gratefully, for those gardeners who survey our gardens daily looking for the first signs of spring, these garden gems are there for us. They are ready to offer us a spring rainbow, even before the pollinators are in full swing and the other perennials are ready to fill in.

To help you create this multi-season color, I have focused on the hardiest varieties I know. In my part of the world, I need them to overwinter. Up here in Zone 5B, I have found that layers of snow protect these plants from the bitter cold, helping preserve the plants for a spring burst into action. If you live in an area with mild winters and no snow, you have a good chance of them keeping you company over the winter. Who doesn't need sparkle on those short daylight days?

Growing Conditions

These nectar-rich flowers are also low maintenance. They can handle a wide range of light from full sun to partial shade, just not full shade. They can handle bits of drought, but like many plants, bloom better with consistent water. When you plant them, they want soil that stays moist and well-drained. Mulching them in your border helps maintain the moisture they are looking for. Of course, the type of viola you buy affects the results as much as the care.

Finding the Best

While to some, all violas look the same, they do not all perform that way. Knowing your way around different series can help you pick some beauties that have the best chance of sticking around.

In the past few years, as I began trialing violas in my garden, I discovered the Sorbet Series. I am a *huge* fan! They are listed as flowering from early spring through fall, which I observed to be true. When temps hit the 90s, they were not producing as many flowers as the temperate times of the year, but they rebounded nicely when the hottest summer sun passed. They have a hardiness -10. While not every plant I've had has made it through the winter, many did. The flowers noted as XP in the series have bigger blooms, which help them grab attention, even when they are low to the ground.

The Penny Series also is popular for these same reasons. They tout early blooming and uniformity in their plants. Making note of their strong root system is a clear advantage for those needing to overwintering. They are 4-6 inches high and wide and frost tolerant. There are not as many colors as the Sorbet, but the ones they have are performers.

Buying Seeds vs Plants

There are advantages to both paths. Those who want to save time and hassle can buy actual plants, something many gardeners are eager to do. There is great fun to be had by grabbing little plugs of violas at the local nursery and setting them next to other annuals and perennials to find the exact color combinations you love. You also get to see the size and condition of the plants, which is a strong bonus. I find equal joy in doing the same with reputable gardening catalogs. Sometimes by looking through these online vendors you can find varieties that are not easily attained locally. Just be sure to make sure you have a vendor with a long history and/or guarantees with your order. Then you know you'll get first rate product.

Another approach is buying seeds. While this is taking on more work and mess, it comes with other advantages. Buying seeds gives you access to even more varieties, allowing you to customize to your heart's content. You also can save a lot of money. A packet of seeds can give you 20-40 seeds for less than the price of one plant at the local garden center. Those of us who love the idea of fuller borders without an endless budget get very excited at the prospect of more plants for way less. You still need to factor in the materials to start the seeds – soils, trays, and light fertilizer, but you can come out financially way ahead.

The Economical Rainbow

And if you want to be even more economically minded, many series have multi-colored seed mixes. You won't know what you have where until it blooms, but I also find moving them is not a huge issue, particularly in the spring or fall. So, if you want to just sample violas and see how they do in your yard and what colors you like, a mix may be the perfect path forward. And you get fun surprises every time a new plant reveals its bloom.

However, for those of us who go gaga for certain color combinations and arranging colors reign supreme, here is some inspiration. These violas are brimming with colorful possibilities. When you find the color combination that is perfect for you, then indulge.

A Romantic Red:



Viola Sorbet® XP Red

Red violas are few and far between. Discovering the Viola Sorbet red was a true delight. I found that it held its red color. It does mention that it is on the late side of blooming, but my family thought it was well worth the wait. It's an excellent warm color addition to the border.

The Petite Pinks:



Viola Sorbet® XP Pink Wing (left)

There is a certain charm to the light pink viola. This little beauty has graced our garden for the last two years. Tough as nails, it rebounds nicely to tough weather. It also plays very nicely with all sorts of colors from pastels to the bolds.

Viola Sorbet® Carmine Rose (right)

Looking for a pink that says “Look at me.” Try the bold rose color of Viola Sorbet® Carmine Rose. Its intensity really pops out among neighboring green, white and purple.

The “Oh” so Great Oranges:



Sorbet® XP Deep Orange Viola (left)

Did you know that violas came in orange? I did not find these beauties until I was seeking out orange flowers for my youngest daughter's garden. They are wonderful for the border and make a variety of colors pop. Giving more of a true orange color, it's wonderful for yearlong impact.

Penny Pro Orange (right)

Another great option provided by the Penny series is the Penny Pro Orange. The color is similar to the Sorbet Series, perhaps a bit lighter. I would buy whichever orange I could find.

The Perky Yellows:



Viola Sorbet® Lemon Chiffon (left)

The yellow violas are seemingly limitless. You can afford to get picky, depending on what kind of sparkle you are trying to add to your garden. I was really drawn to this two-tone beauty and it did not disappoint when it bloomed. The name lemon chiffon is perfect, it looks like the most delicate lemon confection. I particularly enjoyed this one with shades of berry and mauve around it.

Penny Yellow (right)

If you are looking for a yellow to leap out and say hello, then this is a great one to try. The color really carries a true vibrant yellow, beckoning your attention at even a glance. Its dark whiskers add fun contrast and emphasize its shape. Its inherent brightness also pops darker hues, which makes it extra fun in a mix.

Nothin' but the Blues:



Viola Sorbet® XP Delft Blue (left)

This one is my very favorite. I have always felt there are not enough blue flowers for the garden. So when one comes across my path, I simply must try it. The periwinkle blue just shines in the sun, enhanced by the white contrast. I'm not the only person who feels this way. It received Europe's top prize: A Fleuroselect Gold Medal winner.

Viola Sorbet® XP True Blue (right)

If true blue captures your heart, this one is perfect. When the light hits, it almost illuminates it. The calm shade can add depth next to bright colors or enhance the flow next to the cool ones.

The Promising Purples:



Penny™ Purple Picotee Viola (left)

I am a huge fan of picotee flowers and this viola is beautiful. Throughout the season, the color varied, sometimes more white, other times more purple. In any form, it was still a great supporting player to its neighbors and did not need much attention. Even better, I was able to overwinter it and it lived up to the promise of an early bloom. For beautiful and toughness, add this to your border.

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Penny Denim Jump-Up (right)

These little darlings bring a multicolor experience, which drew me to them immediately. The center ranges from purple to blue, depending on the temperature. The rich purple is very dark. It's a great one to see change in your garden over the year.

The Pristine Whites:



Viola Sorbet® XP White (left)

White flowers are classy, elegant and traditional. They make friends with almost any neighbor. My favorite part? They glow in the moonlight. For that reason alone, I try to keep a variety of white blooms at the front of my border. The Sorbet XP White is awesome at filling this role.

Admire® Cream (right)

Upon researching this article, I found mention of this off-white wonder. It gives a romantic old-fashioned feel, ready to feel at home anywhere you please. It also boasts of early spring performance and loads of blooms. What's not to love?

A Rustic Brown:



Viola Sorbet® Honeybee

While the entire flower is not brown here, the amber coloration is striking. Its warmth adds an uncommon hue to the garden. The contrast between the yellow and brown causes each to sparkle. For a more subtle mix of hues, I adore the way it presents itself in my border.

Wait, there's Black!?!?



Viola Sorbet® Black Delight

My husband's favorite color is black and my daughters wanted to add black flowers to the garden for him. To my surprise, Viola Sorbet® Black Delight worked like a dream. It is also a great addition to Halloween planters or baskets when mixed with orange. In our family, we wanted to

pay homage to our favorite penguin stuffed animals, so we mixed some together with white to achieve a fun effect. An added bonus, it's bound to catch people by surprise who did not even know that black was a garden option.

Now that you've seen the colorful possibilities violas hold, how many will make it into your garden? And can you really wait until spring? Thank goodness there's always pre-ordering.