

NOMENCLATURE

THE BIRDFOOT VIOLETS

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Viola pedata is in no way an alpine nor even a "rock plant," yet it is universally sought for growing on rock gardens. Perhaps the most appealing of its world-wide race, it seems to have no really close relatives and might be thought of as a primitive development since it has evolved no ways and means of side-stepping sexuality as have so many of its kind. It makes neither stolons nor cleistogamous flowers and thus must rely on ordinary channels of most seed plants for its perpetuation and distribution. But on the flip-side, neither does it ever present any threat of becoming a weed, as do many violets, pretty though they may be.

It is to be found in eastern United States from Maine to Minnesota and Illinois (possibly into adjacent Canada) and south as far as Texas and the highlands of Florida. The lovely concolorous form was the first known, described by John Bartram as early as 1688, and listed by Miller in the famous Gardener's Dictionary of 1759 as being grown in the Chelsea Physick Garden. As it was the plant familiar to Linnaeus, it becomes the type form of the species. Although later described by DeCondolle as the variety atropurpurea (1824), today's rules would allow it to become variety pedata, altogether more fitting as it may be white, lilac-blue, pinkish, purple to deep violet, always with a golden eye pattern.

The distinct form with a pair of darker dorsal petals was called variety lineariloba by DeCondolle from the character of its leaves, ordinarily deeply incised, though not a constant nor infallible criterion. This form is commonly mis-called variety bicolor, an appropriate though spurious name, and it occurs most commonly within the midsection of the total range of the species.

Birdfoot violets suffer a very unsatisfactory garden reputation, as much as anything for Farrer's totally irresponsible advice they be given a soil that is "rich and clammy" when nothing could be further from their wants. Without fail they are found on sandy humus soils whether in grassland or open woodland, soils always warm and lean, anything BUT rich and clammy, and although they will appreciate liberal waterings and repay with flower through the summer, they quickly depart any waterlogged situation. The light shade of an overhanging branch might be welcome in the bright days, but overshadowing will diminish bud-set and flower-show, inevitably reducing the plant's vigor.

In addition to seeds, propagation may result from root-cuttings or by the wedge-sectioning of the short carrot-like rootstock itself, each section treated carefully as a cutting. The heather garden has been suggested as an appropriate place to grow the birdfoot violets, but surely they must be carefully positioned lest they be overrun by the heathers. Some admirers think this the finest of all violets, and there is much competition from many of the some 400 species of all but the most arid parts of all the continents. I would have to agree that it the favorite of those familiar to me.