

Violet *Viola riviniana*

Early Dog Violet *Viola reichenbachiana*

What's in a name?

The word 'violet' comes from the Latin name '*Viola*'. The Greeks used it as the common name for this particular plant, but there is little evidence to suggest that there was any deeper meaning. There are some 500-600 different species and one of the more common in the UK is the 'Dog Violet'. Use of the word 'dog' refers to a lack of scent, as opposed to 'sweet' violet. 'Dog' or 'horse', is an English prefix used to distinguish a plant as an inferior species from a more notable species. Regional names for the plant include blue mice, cuckoo's shoe and shoes and stockings.

Botany & Ecology

This perennial herb is one of the first plants to flower in the spring, the five petals can be violet, blue, yellow, cream or even white (see Portchester Common in March). The leaves around the base are kidney shaped and those growing out of the rosette are heart shaped. Both leaves and stems are hairy; the leaves less so than the stems. There are both male and female flowers on the plant which are pollinated by a variety of insects. When the seed capsules burst, the rather dull brown seeds can be projected several meters. The distance the seeds travel can be accentuated by local populations of ants.



This is a particularly special plant, as it is the food plant of the pearl bordered fritillary, small pearl-bordered fritillary, silver-washed fritillary and high brown fritillary butterflies.

Folklore

Many country folk believed that if a child swallowed one of their milk teeth, they would have to eat a dog violet petal to prevent the adult tooth from growing long, like a dog's tooth.

The Romans believed the violet flower was a symbol of mourning and would lay a bouquet of violet flowers on the graves of their loved ones as a sign of affection and ensure that they would rest in peace.

Medieval Christians believed the violets form was associated with the crucifixion of Christ. It was thought that the stems and flowers were once upright but became short and bent when the shadow of the cross fell upon them. The aspect of colour appears in many European cultures with the white violet symbolising innocence. associations with love can be found throughout the ages and the Celts even made love potions from the flowers.

Folk Medicine

No part of the plant is poisonous and it has been used in many culinary/ salad dishes particularly as the leaves are rich in vitamin A and C. The Greeks first used the plant to create a mouthwash to cure mouth ulcers and throat cancer. An ointment was also made from the plant to reduce swellings or soar chapped skin and was applied to a bandage or plaster as a dressing. This ointment is still used by modern day herbalists.

One of the nicknames for this plant is Heartsease. This originates from its use as a medicine to treat heart disease during the 16th and 17th centuries. Originally, herbalists believed that the shape of the leaf or flower was God's way of showing that it should be used to treat the heart. Lastly, medieval monks recommended making and wearing a garland of violet flowers if the patient was suffering from a bad headache or felt dizzy.

*Please note, readers should take advice from a qualified doctor or herbalist before using plants as a cure for ailments.