

Plates 7 and 8 Viola Hederacea

Viola grandiflora and *Viola humilis*

Botany Bay, Australia 28 April – 6
May 1770

Though this plant was seen in
Botany Bay in 1770, it had been
known in Greece over 2000 years
previously. However, we do not
know the particular species of violet



referred to. The violet is common and widespread in south eastern Australia. It has often been considered problematic, with numerous forms difficult to adequately distinguish.

Between 1606 and 1770 more than 50 European ships had made landfall in Australia, mostly on the northern and western coasts while heading for the East Indies spice islands. Around this time gardens and nurseries were developing in London and elsewhere so the demand for plants was growing. Plants were traded all over Europe. Violets must have been among these.

An observer in 1798 said that Chelsea was one of the select parishes where much ground was occupied by nurserymen... 'who spare no expense in collecting the choicest sort and the greatest variety of fruit trees and ornamental shrubs and flowers from every quarter of the Globe'. (1)

Kevin Thiele and Suzanne Prober have performed many field studies of *Viola hederacea* and found that there were two distinct species and a new hybrid. (2)

Kevin Thiele, working in Australia, found that *Viola hederacea*, also collected in the 18th Century by the French botanist Labillardiere in the early 1790s, was not the same as that found by Banks. The species found by Banks was hardier and showier. This is now known as *Viola banksii*. (2)

Richard Mabey describes violets as 'a variable and promiscuous family'. He thinks that there may be around 30 species, with many sub-species, variants and oddities. (3)

Sappho, the Greek poet, was born on Lesbos around 615BC. In her poem 'No Word' she refers to 'violet tiaras'. Her name and birthplace have become symbolic of love between women and violets are symbolic of that love. (4)

In 1926 the play by Edward Bourdet, 'La Prisonniere', was one of the first to involve a lesbian relationship. A bouquet of violets was left behind to symbolise lesbian love. (5)

Hildegard von Bingen (1098 – 1179) was a gifted composer and herbalist. In her book 'Physica' she advocates the use of violets for skin conditions, headaches and depression.

Violets have long been associated with the humility of the virgin Mary and the term 'shrinking violet' was first coined by Leigh Hunt in the 1920's.

Violet Gray first appeared in 1951 in the comic strip 'Peanuts' created by Schulz. Not a shrinking violet, she was rather a bragging snob. (6)

Violet Beauregarde also found a golden ticket in Roald Dahl's 1964 book, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Again, not a shrinking violet but a bad mannered, gum-chewing, competitive girl. (7)

The purple colour of violets was used by the suffragette movement to publicise their cause ... GREEN for hope, WHITE for purity, VIOLET or purple for dignity and femininity...GIVE WOMEN the VOTE. (8)

June Carter

Sources

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Australian native plants Society

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Violet Beauregarde – Wikipedia

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