

Native Wild Foods

The Native Violet

by Dick Deuerling and Peggy Lantz

The violet, subject of many poems, is romantic, very beautiful, and quite useful. Dick says, "My wife, Dorothy, and I have added the romance of violets to our marriage, for, since before we were married and for more than 50 years now, we have made a springtime, day-long picnic expedition to the woods to pick violets. It is a pleasant and enjoyable tradition."

Florida has seven or eight different species of violet, *Viola* spp. All of them are edible, so you don't have to worry which is which. (This does not include the African violet, just the native species.) Of course, it is always best for the inexperienced forager to harvest only when they are blooming, because some look-alikes may not be tasty, or may be toxic. Use care in eating violets the first time, because — as with many other plants — some people may be allergic to this specific group. Try it in small amounts before you indulge. The roots are cathartic, and said to be an emetic, so eat only the above-ground parts.

One of the interesting things about violets is that you don't need to worry about hurting next year's crop when you pick the flowers, because the flower you pick is not the one that makes the seed. A violet has two

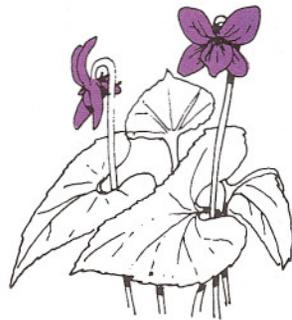
flowers — one to pick and one for seed.

Violets are high in sugar content, and in vitamins A and C and beta-carotene. This makes them a pretty good food in addition to tasting good.

Violet leaves come in several shapes — the most easily recognized heart-shape, lance-shaped or linear, and lobed. They can be dried, crushed, and steeped in boiling water for seven or eight minutes to make a good tea. The leaves can also be used as a salad, although they are bland. Mix them with other wild salad plants available at this time of the year. They can also be cooked like spinach to make a palatable potherb.

Violets are among the favorites of the "flower-eaters". The flowers can be picked, washed, and eaten out-of-hand, or used for decoration on the icing on cakes, or as a garnish on the salad. The flowers also can be candied, made into herbal vinegar, syrup, or jelly to be enjoyed any time of the year after the blooming season is over.

One of the common names for the violet is Johnnie jump-up, because they are one of the first plants to recover and bloom after a forest fire.



Dick has hiked and camped with Boy Scouts for many years, and he tells this tale about a recent hike on the Ocala Trail; "We came to a place where a fire had burned through. I stopped the boys for a break, 3:30 in the afternoon, after they had been on the trail with full pack all day. I told them about the violets that were blooming through the ashes, and sat down myself to sample the goodies.

"I got a big laugh out of some of the boys. 'The old man is crazy! He's eating the flowers!'

"But one by one, they tried them and found them to be sweet. And I'm sure I don't have to tell you what happens when tired boys ingest sugar!"

Remember, in all of your foraging for edible wild plants to avoid roadsides where car exhaust may have settled on nearby plants, or any places where pesticides may have been sprayed.

Dick Deuerling, wild food expert, is co-author of FNPS' book Florida's Incredible Wild Edibles.