

Sweet Violet *Viola odorata*

O wind, where have you been,
That you blow so sweet?
Among the violets
Which blossom at your feet.

The honeysuckle waits
For Summer and for heat
But violets in the chilly Spring
Make the turf so sweet.

Christina Rossetti

Not only a favourite for poets, Sweet Violet has a long history in herbal medicine and for culinary uses. It has made a tasty garnish on salads and deserts for hundreds of years. The leaves form a mild bulk addition to salads, useful as they can be harvested through the winter, and the flowers are one of the first appearing in early spring.



Photo: "today in Rijswijk, Netherland"

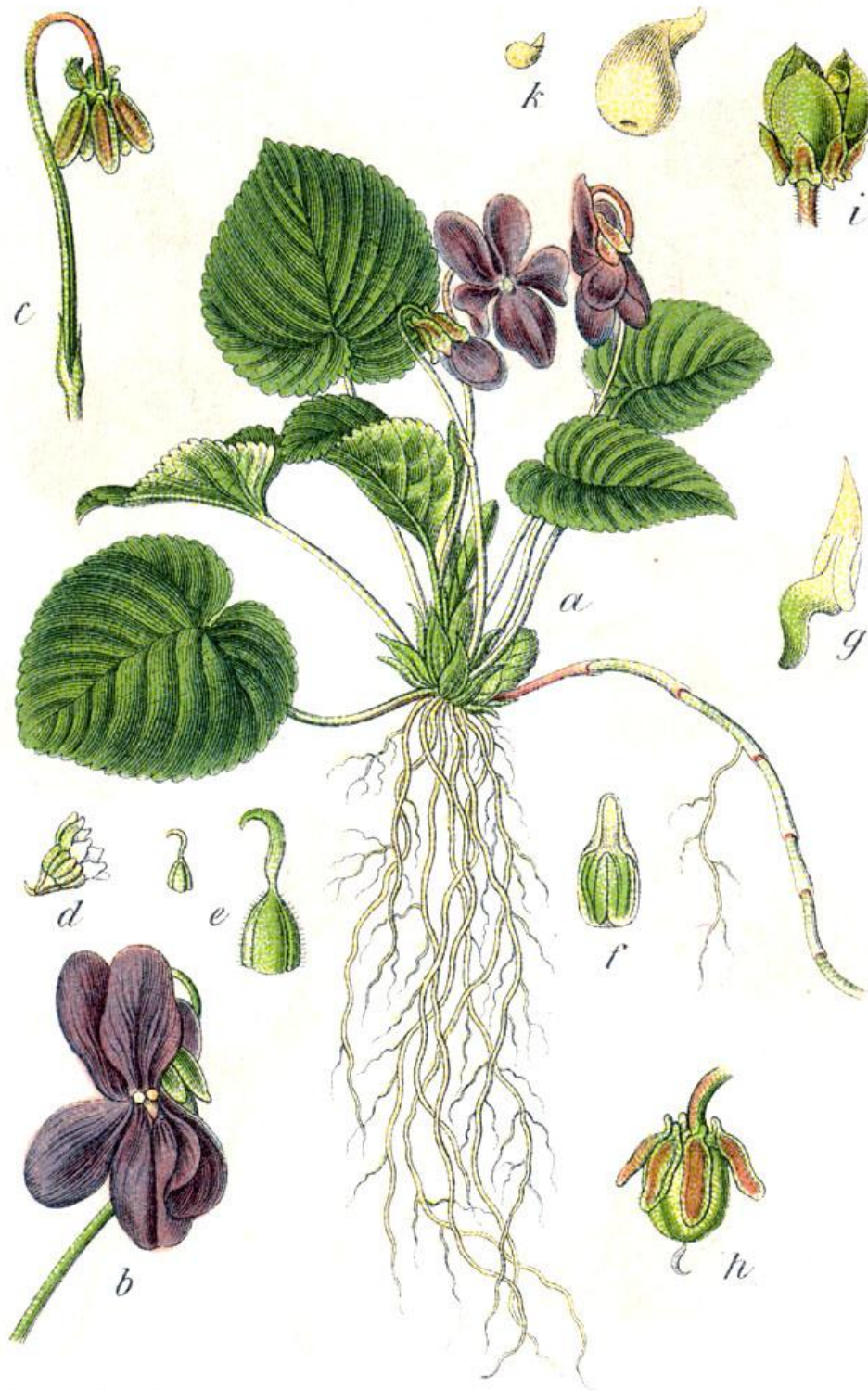
<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Viola-odorata-closeup.jpg>

Sweet Violet seeds are dispersed by ants, a process called myrmecochory. Each seed has a portion at its end, called an elaiosome, which ants use as a food source. They carry the seed to their nest, eat the elaiosome and leave the rest to germinate in the fine frass of the ant's nest that forms ideal seed compost.

But it doesn't start there. Sweet Violet flower buds sometimes do not open to allow pollination by insects. Such flowers are said to be cleistogamous and are self-pollinated. At other times the flowers are chasmogamous, opening fully to allow pollinations by various bees, especially the solitary flower bees, *Anthophora* species and the mason bee, *Osmia pilicornis*, as well as bumble and honey bees.

In poetry, medicine, cuisine, botany, and ecology, this little flower has great place. Easy to grow, a place for *Viola odorata* should be found in everyone's garden.





Viola odorata 1796 Johann Georg Sturm (Painter: Jacob Sturm)
 Figure from Deutschlands Flora in Abbildungen at <http://www.biolib.de>

