



BWSR Featured Plant

Name: Common Blue Violet (*Viola sororia*)

Plant Family: Violet (Violaceae)

Statewide Wetland
Indicator Status:

- FAC



Colony of common blue violet

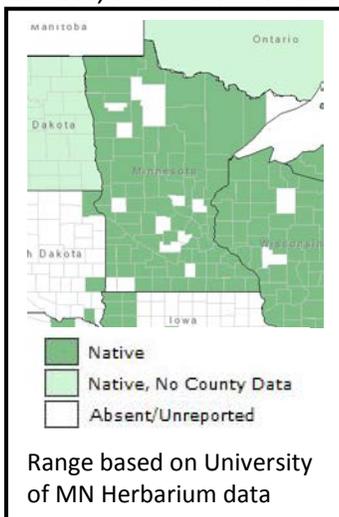
Also known as “Northern Blue Violet” and “Woolly Blue Violet”, Common Blue Violet has a widespread native range across Minnesota and Central to Eastern United States. Found in lawns to roadsides and woodlands to fields, it prefers partial sun and moist soils, but can tolerate full sun if not too dry. Easily spreading through rhizomes or self-seeding, this herbaceous perennial makes an attractive ground cover. Flowers bloom in early spring (May to June) and intermittently through summer and attract bees and butterflies. Fritillary butterfly caterpillars (genus *Speyeria*) utilize violet leaves for food. As the state flower of 4 states (including Wisconsin), the attractiveness of Common Blue Violet is well known.



Heart shaped leaf with blunt tip

Identification

Five broadly spreading petals of a single flower, $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 inch across, are typically deep-blue violet, fading to white and then pale yellow at the base. While some variation exists, all flowers exhibit this yellowish fading and side petals with tufts of white hair or beards. Lower leaves are heavily veined with dark violet lines that guide insects to the nectar of the flower. Leaves are basal, beginning at the base of the plant at the root. Heart shaped leaves are 2-3 inches long and 2-3 inches across with a blunt tip on leaves higher up and more rounded tipped on leaves lower to the ground. Flowering stems are leafless, around 6 inches tall, and range from few to several and smooth to more typically hairy.



Range

While data is missing for some counties, Common Blue Violets are likely in every county in Minnesota. They are native and common in every US state from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains, Utah, California, and eastern to central Canada. Moist and relatively well-drained soils are preferred that are rich in organic matter (dark in color) and nutrients. In natural areas they are found in woodland floors, prairies, and along rivers and streams. In developed areas they are found in lawns, landscaped areas, parks, and in wildflower gardens.



Flowers can make decorative edibles

Uses

Although the plant can self-pollinate to produce seeds or spread through a root system of rhizomes to produce identical plants, many pollinators such as bees and butterflies utilize Common Blue Violet as an early nectar source and can cross-pollinate flowers. Fritillary butterflies exclusively use leaves of the violet family as food for their caterpillars. The leaves and flowers are edible. Leaves are high in vitamin A and vitamin C, but are somewhat bland. They are usually mixed into salads with more distinct tasting leafy greens or used to thicken soups. Flowers are vitamin C rich and can be used to make teas, jams, colorful additions to salads, or cake decorations.

Primary Uses:

- Ground cover
- Flower/pollinator gardens
- Edibles

Planting Recommendations

Common Blue Violet makes an excellent ground cover under shrubs and along walkways or as an alternative for lawn grasses, as it spreads into thick colonies quickly. If already present, it will self-seed or spread through root systems if not mowed too early and conditions are favorable. Seeding can be done after seeds ripen in summer or in the fall. Plants can also be divided and introduced to new areas. In small gardens the species can spread into undesired areas, so barriers may be needed. Plants are not known to attract deer, however seeds are eaten by wild turkey and mourning doves.

Planting Methods

- Self-propagating
- Seed
- Plant division

Similar Species

With over 21 violet species in Minnesota, most of which are blue to purple or white, it can be difficult to identify Common Blue Violet. Two commonly mistaken violets are Birdfoot Violet (*Viola pedata*) and Prairie Violet (*Viola pedatifida*). While difficult to tell the two apart, Birdfoot Violet and Prairie Violet differ from Common Blue Violet by their heavily lobed leaves. Rare white variations of Common Blue Violet are sometimes mistaken for Canadian White Violet. Common Blue Violet in its white variation has a pale yellow center while Canadian White Violet (*Viola canadensis*) has a distinct dark yellow center. Canadian White Violet also has leaves that branch from the stem, while Common Blue Violet's leaves only come from the base of the plant at the root (referred to as basal).



Deeply lobed leaf of Prairie Violet
Image by Peter Dziuk of Minnesota Wildflowers



Dark yellow center of Canadian White Violet
Image by Peter Dziuk of Minnesota Wildflowers

References

<https://www.minnesotawildflowers.info/flower/common-blue-violet>,
<http://www.friendsofthewildflowergarden.org/pages/plants/blueviolet.html>,
http://practicalplants.org/wiki/Viola_sororia, <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/>, <http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info>