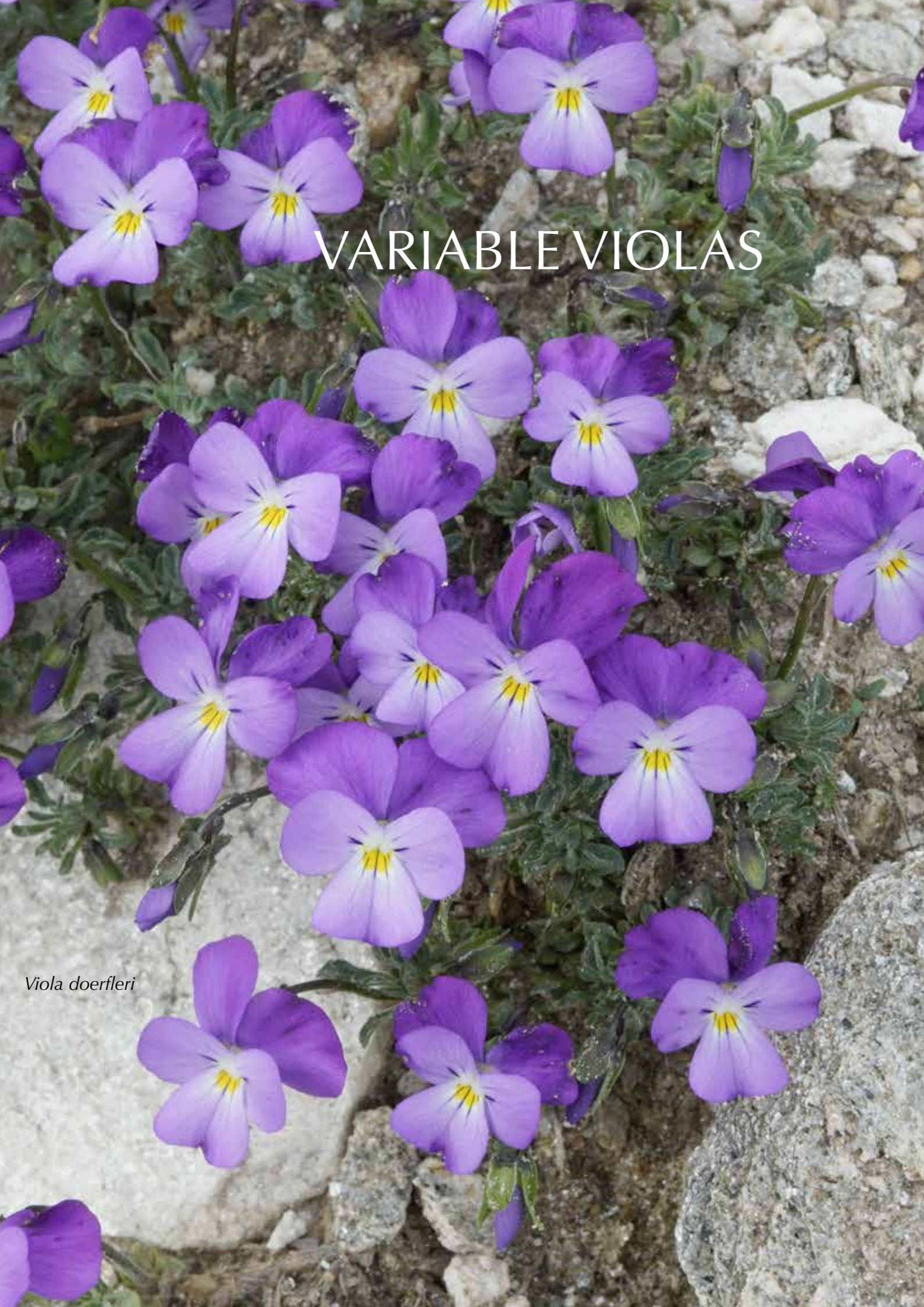


VARIABLE VIOLAS



Viola doerfleri



Viola macedonica

The humble violet, all too often distorted into a gaudy floppy mess and renamed a pansy, colourful perhaps but far from the truth and belying a rich and varied genus. True, there are some 'typical' violets that sprinkle to woods and margins in spring with equally typical flowers; open faced with neat lines around the mouth often delicately fringed with white hairs. It is the flower design that remains the constant, they are always instantly recognisable as being violets. But where they grow and the architectural and design of their other parts can be breathtakingly different. They very widespread plants, but their main distribution takes in the Eurasia and North America, down to the farthest southern tip of windswept Patagonia. What is interesting is how they have morphed in these different centres.

In Europe they are at their most familiar and few countries excel at *Viola* more than Greece with 63 species (30% endemic), such as large-flowered *Viola graeca*, a beauty that decorates stony slopes and woodland edges around Mount Parnassos in May. It is fairly widespread, but many Greek violets are confined to more limited areas or even individual peaks as in the case of lovely *Viola doerfleri*, found only on Mount Voras and adjacent peaks, where it smothers stony ground and slopes in June and July, coating the gravels in a veneer of soft lilac. At this season the turf around is peppered with *Gentiana verna*, *Dianthus myrtinervius* and countless magenta *Geranium subcaulescens* in a glorious alpine show. Other mountains in northern Greece at this time



Viola graeca



Viola gracilis



Viola crassifolia



Viola crassiuscula



Viola odontocalycina



Viola altaica

have other species, such as *Viola macedonica*, which varies from violet to yellow, creating some dazzling mixtures. Across the Aegean Sea in Turkey, we find floriferous masses of *V. gracilis* below the limestone peaks of the Taurus, which play host to the diminutive scree specialist *V. crassifolia* later on in mid-summer. Another Turkish scree-runner is *V. odontocalycina*, found only in a few inland Black Sea mountains, whilst high up in the Sierra Nevada of Spain is the similar *V. crassiuscula*, again thriving in the mobile substrate of scree. It is a fact that many species of violet choose to grow in such unstable ground (especially Andean violets), but even if it is not their regular home, they look wonderful growing in it such as *V. somchetica* from Armenia. Likewise, *V. altaica* a species with a huge range from eastern Turkey to Central Asia, these photographed in Kyrgyzstan on a loose bank, but they are more typically found in alpine tuft, scattered across the ground in a random assortment of violet, mauve or yellow. Also found in Kyrgyzstan is the much smaller *V. tianshanica*, a plant with rather oval leaves and a flower shape closer to the remarkable Andean violets. Close to these grew *V. palmata*, a species with dissect leaves and what we see as we



Viola tianshanica



Viola somchetica



Viola alliarifolia



Viola hallii



Viola atropurpurea



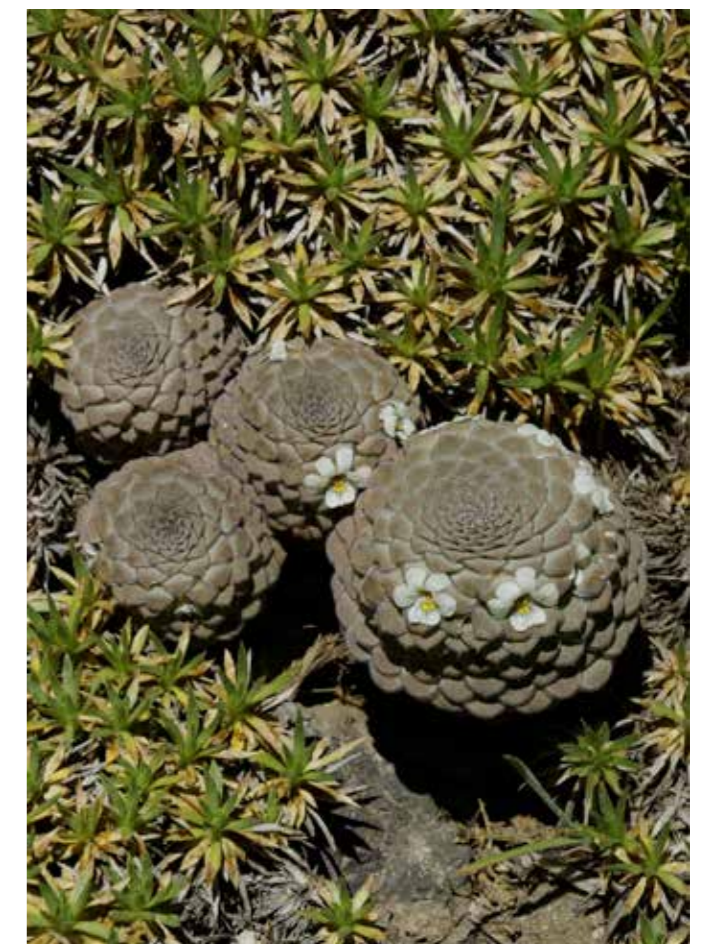
Viola lobata

move east and ultimately across the Bering Strait is a far greater variation in foliage shape. In Japan we see *V. alliarifolia* with its neatly crimped margins. Cross over the Pacific to California and among its 26 species we see some real shifts in leaves, the most exaggerated examples those in *V. lobata* and the somewhat tidier and prettier *V. hallii*, these growing on serpentine flats with *Calochortus tolmei*, *Delphinium andersonii* and the azure trumpets of *Penstemon heterophylla* in May. The violets continue south, even in Costa Rica there is the delicate *V. guatemalensis* on the misty heights of Cerro de la Muerte.

However, carry on south and there is the most dramatic shift in design. It is in the Andes that the genus has adapted to the plethora of high mountain habitats to form the most remarkable collection of violets anywhere on Earth. Whilst there are typical species in the woods below such as *V. reichii*, most have gone down a different path. Even in the dry lands of the Atacama Desert there are indications that things have changed. When the rain comes (and it did in spectacular fashion on 2022, and may do so again in 2023), in places the stony ground is carpeted in tiny rosettes *Viola polypoda*, the golden foil for the abundant *Alstroemeria*, *Mirabilis*, *Zephyranthes* and *Zephyra*. Similar *V. pusilla* is woollier and this species probably hints even more strongly at what is to come.



Viola pusilla



Viola skottsbergiana



Viola congesta



Viola congesta



Viola volcanica



Viola microphylla

It is up in the sun-drenched mountains where intense insolation and steep cinder slopes have created a niche for the world's ultimate violets. Their forms have become very compact to conserve moisture (and their roots are very long to remain on their shifting homes), with densely overlapping often texture leaves between which the flowers emerge. And if the immediate impression from leaves alone is of something quite un-violetlike, the flowers reveal all, so typical in shape (for the most part at least).

Our first experience of these beauties was *Viola congesta* on the ash slopes of Altos de Lircay, where the best specimens of the softly hairy rosettes were ringed with golden-mouthed flowers. On the black ash of Volcan Antuco grows the similar *V. volcanica*, often in great numbers. Indeed, some species are locally abundant, but what can be frustrating when searching for Andean violets (as with many plants) is they are localised and large tracts of seemingly suitable habitat bear nothing. One of the finest of all species; *V. atropurpurea*, eluded me for years until I was directed to the correct slope where sure enough there were many superb little turrets and discs of exquisite tightly-packed leaves and darkest violet flowers (flecked with waxy appendages). The flowers may be small, but they are attended by some



Viola montagnei



Viola glacialis



Viola cotyledon, Laguna de Maule, Chile



Viola cotyledon, Volcan Llaima, Chile (below)



hefty bumblebees even at the rarified 3000 metres I was photographing these. Likewise, I found *V. skottsbergii* quite by accident, having stopped to look at the impressive mats of *Azorella monantha* at Paso Vergara, suddenly finding the gorgeous little buttons studded with ivory flowers, some actually growing among the *Azorella*. Other pretty species include *V. microphylla* (common at Farellones) with leaves like miniature savoy cabbages, and the seldom seen *V. montagnei* from the drier Andes inland from the Elqui Valley (again only encountered in one isolated patch of scree). It also grows alongside *V. atropurpurea* near Santiago. More species grow over the border in Argentina such as showy *V. sacculus*, but my own botanical wanderings have always kept me in the more varied lands of Chile.

It is the borderlands between the two countries though where these stunning plants perhaps come reach their peak. One of the showiest species is also one of the commonest and it is undoubtedly a plant that demands a view. The magnificent sweeping volcanic landscapes of Laguna de Maule host a huge population of *Viola cotyledon*. Rather than form tight little domes these create mounds that are buried beneath much larger showier flowers in a variety of colour forms. Basak and I have also seen them with the classic snow-capped cone of Volcan Llaima and the backdrop of Laguna de Laja is not bad either. Beats rainy Britain in December and violets are one of the few genera that give us dual pleasure, with northern abundance followed by the option of flying south for winter.

Viola cotyledon, Laguna de Laja, Chile



Colour forms of *Viola cotyledon*, Chile