



# VIVA VOLCANO

*Viola cotyledon*



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Some plants simply demand a view. I can think of few others that choose a more spectacular location than *Viola cotyledon*, one of the much-admired and desired Andean or rosular violets. This is a remarkable group of violets, one that has adapted to the harsh, sharply-draining volcanic soils by developing fleshy, tightly overlapping leaves to reduce moisture-loss. Their exquisite rosettes come in various designs, mostly delightful little masterpieces. And, little most of them are simply finding some species in the stony terrain can be a challenge.

*Viola cotyledon* is one of the commonest and widespread species I find in Chile, preferring volcanic ash and growing in some stunning places. When Basak and I photographed them at Conguillio national park, towering Volcan Lliama had just begun to erupt (see the ash-stained snows in the background) and occasional rumblings gave the whole experience a certain edge. The following day the park was closed as the eruption gained momentum! The same species also grows near the impressive black-ash cone of Volcan Antuco, flourishing alongside countless *Viola farkanensis*. Older slopes in the same areas have many other wonderful plants including billowing clumps of *Lathyrus multiceps* and lava flows illuminated with *Calceolaria meyeniana* subsp.



*Lathyrus multiceps*



*Viola atropurpurea*



*Viola glacialis*



*Oxalis adenophylla*



*glabrata*. *V. cotyledon* also grows by the thousand on the slopes of other volcanoes in the Chilean Lake District and in stunning domes around Laguna de Maule, much further to the north. At the latter, they can be found on loose slopes near the deep violet of *V. glacialis* or scattered drifts of rich pink *Oxalis adenophylla*.

However, our first ever Andean violet was soft-leaved *Viola congesta*, which we found complete with flower rings at Altos de Lircay, on a florally-rich 2000-metre ridge, also alongside *Oxalis adenophylla*. Finding choice plants with a perfect ring of flowers makes that special image, but some species have such incredible foliage that the flowers are almost secondary. Almost. On a recent trip to Chile, we found a strong population of *Viola atropurpurea*, a species with the dense, tightly overlapping rosettes, with mature specimens forming textured columns, topped by rings of deepest burnt-violet flowers, each one bearing outer petals that were encrusted with waxy flakes. They were growing in loose scree above an azure alpine lake and in the even looser material nearby was their cousin; *V. montagnei*, with flowers of impossibly dark, near-black violet.

However, true to form I had marched on up the slope to the scree and managed to walk straight past, not only typical colour forms of *V. atropurpurea*,

*Viola atropurpurea* yellow form



*Viola congesta*



*Viola montagnei*

*Viola skottsbergiana*



*Tropaeolum polyphyllum* &  
*Schizanthus grahamii*

but a gorgeous citrine colour form. Luckily, we managed to find it again on the way down. *V. atropurpurea* is rather similar in form the *V. skottsbergiana*, and we know of a population of these in one of my favourite alpine areas of Chile; Paso Vergara.

This wonderful, scenic area has many fine plants on the drive in with stands of *Alstroemeria ligtu* subsp. *splendens*, slopes with little rivers of golden *Tropaeolum polyphyllum* and the cerise-and-gold of *Schizanthus grahamii*. Dense mats of *Azorella monantha* ooze across the rocks, densely plastered in pale yellow flowers at this time. Sometimes, beautiful tight rosettes of *Viola skottsbergiana* grow among these mats, though more typically they are scattered about the stony slopes. On my last visit we were busy photographing what we thought we good specimens, whilst Rees, a man who would never describe himself as a botanist was being more observant. There, growing directly out the roadside bank he found what can only be described as a 'monster' specimen, much, much larger than anything else we had found. Here was a plant that just didn't need dozens of 'distracting' flowers. The botanists would never live it down, I'd never be allowed to forget not finding such an 'obvious' plant and Rees's satisfactory grin would last a week!



*Azorella monantha*



*Viola skottsbergiana* growing in  
*Azorella monantha*