

# Over and Under the Rainbow

*A Gardener Comes to Terms with Violet*

by DANIEL MOUNT

“WHY DON’T YOU SMILE?” the young woman demanded as she took a seat next to me on the train pulling out of the St. Louis Union Station.

I turned my face, clenched like my fist that held a bouquet of fresh picked violets, toward the window. There seemed nothing more important at that moment than holding back tears. It was April. The train was headed north, away from Missouri’s resplendent spring, and toward Wisconsin still sunk in winter.

And toward the deathbed of one of my dearest friends.

Susan, only 27 and a new mother, was paralyzed from an inoperable brain tumor. During college we had lived together in several unintentional communities of decadents and dilettantes. We had shared our bodies and our lovers— it was the 70s after all—but most importantly we shared our dreams. We both wanted to be artists. Not modern artists, but late nineteenth century artists. I looked to troubled van Gogh for inspiration, while she looked to pensive Monet.



*Ageratum* 'Blue Fields' with *Nassella tenuissima*, Green Bay Botanical Garden, Green Bay, Wisconsin. Photo: Daniel Mount



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Groundbreaking Monet believed shadows were violet not black, in response to the sun's yellow rays. And he used it, this last color of the rainbow, extensively. Violet, the shortest visible wavelength of light is the least visible color, ideal for shadows, but challenging for the gardener.

You might believe the marriage of sexy red with faithful blue would create a perfectly harmonious color. But violet seems to me a more violent clash of bloody red and bruised blue, passive *and* aggressive. Vibrating in these two fields gives violet a visual nap, sumptuous as velvet, turbulent as unsettled seas. Of all the colors, it is the one that befuddles me the most.

And nothing is more befuddling about this color than its nomenclature.

Color scholar Alexander Theroux, in his treatment of the secondary colors says, "Purple is *the* color, violet is a color—it should be noted, but not made into a big deal." I, like many of my gardening friends, call this mysterious moody color purple. If we can believe Wikipedia, violet is the name for the secondary color, while purple represents a color ever so slightly redder.

"Violet" comes from the woodland flower, and has only been used since the late Middle Ages as a color descriptor. Before then, the classical Latin word "purpura"—probably derived from an even earlier Semitic word—was used. Modern garden color authors make it even more confusing, using the words purple and violet interchangeably. Forgive me for doing the same in this article.

I prefer "purple"; there is something musty about the word "violet." It's old, Victorian, nineteenth century—it was called "mauve" then. The last decade of the nineteenth century—the decade in which van Gogh died and Monet began his famous garden—is called the Mauve Decade because of the popularity of the color. It was a prosperous and effete time.

Violet gets a beating from modern garden designers who label it stodgy, depressing, and even dead. The litany goes on with poets and novelists calling it immoral, undemocratic, and worst of all artsy. But to be fair the color some call violet and others purple is just as often lauded as "regal," "opulent," and "atmospheric." Purple mountain majesties, and Prince's "Purple Rain"—whatever that is—come to mind.



Naturalized *Lupinus polyphyllus* seedlings on the author's mother's farm in Iron River, Michigan. Photo: Daniel Mount

And Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze," of course.

Monet declared after many years of arduous outdoor painting, "I have finally discovered the true color of the atmosphere. It's violet. Fresh air is violet."

Certainly our atmosphere is full of invisible ultraviolet rays. The hottest stars, including our sun, emit it constantly. Smart modern gardeners are slathered in a protective layer of sunscreen to keep it out; Monet wore a straw hat. I can see him, standing in his garden at Giverny, his face shadowed by a wide brim, truly seeing the ultraviolet rays. Actually, only bees, nectar-feeding bats, and some birds, robins, and chickadees included, can see ultraviolet.



ABOVE: Columbine seedling (*Aquilegia vulgaris*) in author's garden.

LEFT: *Hydrangea macrophylla* foliage showing stunning fall color in the author's garden.

Photos: Daniel Mount

I wonder what we are missing.

All I would like to do is to truly see visible violet, to grasp its nature. My impatient eyes rush over the solidarity of greens in my garden towards yellow and reds, even true blue. But I rarely take pause for violet. Christopher Lloyd hints, to see what he calls a “joyless” color “you need to be close to [violet] and with the sunlight behind you.” Garden photographer Andrew Lawson says recessive violet “needs to be isolated from stronger colors to maximize its affect.”

What is the confused garden colorist to do?

Tom Fisher, senior acquisitions editor at Timber Press and color aficionado, warns gardeners of violet and its pallid variations, “In isolation, they sometimes lack excitement, it’s creative juxtaposition that makes them come alive.” Beware of bright yellows, though. They are just too aggressively happy for serious violet. I prefer it with the palest yellow, or chartreuse green, myself. Not too much, though. Violet is easily overwhelmed.

Remember, like its namesake flower, it’s shy.

With red it can become lurid, a combination I have not necessarily avoided, but recommend only to those with strong stomachs. Orange makes it look muddy. Blue with violet chills. With white it becomes too dark, nearly black. It is the darkness and depth of violet that is its strength.

This is also why violet has long been the color of mourning. Color historian Victoria Finley speculates that violet’s position at the end of the rainbow symbolizes “both the end of the known and the beginning of the unknown.” Maybe that’s why it’s a little frightening to me, like peering into a chasm.

Still there is something romantic about violet, in a Laura-Ashley-sort-of-way. I would take a handful of fragrant lilacs as a token of love over a dozen red roses any day. It is one of the most common flower colors, nearly as prevalent as yellow. Violet flowers are also the ones most erroneously listed as blue: ‘Johnson’s Blue’ geranium, is not blue. Neither is ‘Big Blue’ daylily, nor ‘Blue Paradise’ phlox.

Are violets even *really* violet?



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By the 1980s, my decadent friends were dying their hair purple, and Susan and I were realizing our dreams. Her love of violet and shadow led her to the darkroom and black-and-white photography. My love of yellow and light led me outdoors, like the Impressionists, not to paint, *per se*, but to garden with color.

When I finally arrived in her dim hospice room that April, I sat next to her on the bed. I slowly pried open her chilly paralytic hand and slid the now wilted violets into

it. I released my clenched face and sobbed. She made one last unintelligible murmur. A “goodbye,” maybe.

She died a few hours later.

I’m not sure how long it took—a few days, a week—but I finally listened to what the young woman on the train said.

And smiled.

*Pacific Northwest garden designer Daniel Mount is working his way through the horticultural rainbow.*



ABOVE: *Syringa vulgaris* ‘President Lincoln’.

RIGHT: Foothill daisy (*Erigeron corymbosus*), Steamboat Rock State Park, Electric City, Washington.

Photos: Daniel Mount

