

Sweet Violets of Every Hue: Violet growing in Devon

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Cultivation of the violet has a long history: the ancient Greeks grew the flowers near Athens over two and a half thousand years ago to sweeten food, they also thought that a crown of violets prevented intoxication.¹ Medieval herbalists recommended violets for their soporific qualities.² In Britain, violets became fashionable from the 1830s for the wealthy to wear as posies attached to hats, headdresses and trains of skirts.³ They also became popular as a bedding plant in estate gardens. In 1865 William Robinson commented on men in Bicton gardens 'busy planting thousands of Crocuses and Tulips and Violets round the borders and in the beds'.⁴ An advertisement for the sale of '2000 choice [flowering] plants', part of the stock of nurseryman, Mr Townsend in Exeter, shows that local growers were rising to the challenge of providing colourful flowers, which included violets, for an increasing market.⁵ Many tons of Parma violets were imported into Britain from Italy and France throughout the nineteenth century and were the favourite flower of all classes from royalty to shop girls. It was not until after WW1 that production of violets grown in this country, mostly from the western counties, could match the imports. The sweet violet, *Viola odorata*, is the only scented violet native to Britain and was one of the first to be commercially grown in the UK. Parma violets, initially imported from Europe, are more tender and have double flowers. From contemporary books and journals, newspaper reports of weddings and funerals and advertisements of market gardeners and nurserymen it is possible to plot their popularity and the growth of the industry.

With a long season from September through to April, violets were often one of the few flowers available during the winter so were useful for corsages, bouquets at weddings and for funeral flowers.⁶ Used in perfume and toiletries, violets were also thought to have certain scientific benefits. An infusion of violets was used as a test for the presence of both acid and alkaline poisons. The former changes its colour to red, the latter to green.⁷ In medicine syrup of violets was used as a cure for coughs and diseases of the chest, the root as an emetic and an infusion of violets was also thought to stop typhus from killing patients.⁸ Twenty gallons of syrup of violets was included in the estate sale of stock of 'Mr John Ridd, Spirit Merchant, Maltster and Brewer, of Market-place, Bideford', demonstrating local demand.⁹

Throughout the hundred years of the popularity

of the violet, gardening instructions were given in local newspapers and contemporary journals for its cultivation. Violets need moist, cool conditions to grow, being found on verges under hedgerows in nature. Although 'too much heat encourages spider mite', during the winter violet frames should face south.¹⁰ Plants are propagated by runners, cuttings, division of the crown or by seed.¹¹ 'Violets will thrive in clay and violets will thrive in sandy ground, but where you see chickweed and groundsel and fat hen there they will more than thrive, they will flourish.'¹² When grown in fields they were less likely to succumb to fungal diseases and could flower from September to November. For production of flowers through the winter, plants were lifted and transplanted into frames or 'framed' in situ to protect them against the worst of the weather. Parma violets, which are more tender, were generally cultivated throughout the season in frames. At William Hannaford's nursery in Teignmouth:

... white and blue Sweet Violets were grown to perfection, both in frames and in the open ground, and large quantities of blooms gathered daily. The double white Comte de Brazza was well grown, and is a beautiful variety, also the double blue Marie Louise.¹³

Initially many plants were sourced from Europe and were mostly Parma violets. During the latter part of the nineteenth century a lot of violet breeding had been done in both France and Britain with Armand Millett at Bourg La Reine, near Paris and George Lee in Somerset competing to increase the size of flowers, length of stem and variety of colours.¹⁴

Violets were grown in Devon prior to the first World War from south to north Devon. In 1909 'Hundreds of exceptionally fine violets were to be seen in Barnstaple Market ... The flowers, many of which were grown locally, were sold at from 1d to 3d per bunch.'¹⁵ At the Torquay Horticultural Society spring flower show in March 1894, Torquay nurserymen, Curtis, Sanford & Co. displayed a collection of plants which included two boxes of sweet-scented violets. A variety of single and double violets were shown by the Beachey nursery of Kingskerswell.¹⁶ Richard Beachey (1839-1911), a retired army officer, florist and nurseryman, lived at Fluder House, Kingskerswell, near Newton Abbot. He was considered to be one of the leading growers in Devon in the 1880s and 90s and grew up to 26 cultivars at his small nursery.¹⁷ Named varieties which he exhibited at Torquay Chrysanthemum show in November 1884, displayed as pot plants and cut flowers, included 'Lady H Campbell', 'Madam Millett' and 'Armagine Millett' with variegated foliage, (obtained from M. Millett in France), 'Compte de Brazza', 'Welsiana' and 'Victoria

Regina' (a favourite of Queen Victoria).¹⁸

The Westcott brothers, Fred and William, of Southbrook Gardens, Kenton, near Starcross, were the first growers from Teignbridge to try the London market. In 1891 they sent bunches of violets by train to Covent Garden Market packed in corset boxes, which were long, narrow and strong.¹⁹ Later they used specially made returnable wooden boxes. A bunch of violets that sold for 1½d in Devon, could fetch 6d in London and Covent Garden would take much larger quantities than could be sold locally. Fred Westcott became a well-known character in the area as he delivered violets to Starcross station by donkey cart, wearing a large sombrero and a buttonhole of violets.²⁰ The Westcott family grew mostly 'Princess of Wales', but they also showed the violet 'Queen Mary' at the Royal Horticultural Society on 14 March 1911.²¹ In the Cockwood area, near Starcross in Devon, there were twenty growers in a natural valley, on small plots of land of three acres or less. Local children picked the violets daily, before and after school, the flowers would then be bunched and packed, 'ten dozen in a box', no mean task as there were up to 50,000 violets despatched to London from just one farm.²²

The first violet farm in Dawlish started in 1916.²³ However, during the First World War, due to the need to grow food, the industry faltered. Despite calls to grow vegetables instead of flowers the South Devon War Agricultural Committee reported that they found that cultivation by tenant growers was still extensively carried on at Dawlish. It was recommended that compulsory orders should be served to substitute potatoes where violets were grown in the open and to forbid violets to be grown under fruit trees. It was noted in April 1918 that there were 2¾ acres of violets still planted in the open and a further four to five acres under trees, but by the end of the month a further report noted that about half the violets planted in the open had been destroyed.²⁴

Following the war, the industry picked up and it was the period between the wars which was the heyday of the violet industry in the Dawlish area. Part of the reason for this was the need to provide housing and work for veterans of the war. Allotments had already been proved to alleviate some of the symptoms of shellshock and other mental and physical problems facing veterans. Using the powers of The Land Settlement (Facilities) Act 1919, with central government providing financial support, county councils were able to purchase and lease land for the provision of smallholdings for returning ex-servicemen without any farming experience.²⁵ A smallholding was any area above an acre and below fifty acres, but

most were two to four acres. It was not just a Devon initiative, but national, although may not have been implemented in every county. Devon already had a lot of small farms so was ideal for resettling ex-servicemen and giving them independence. Some local landowners, such as the Earl of Devon, were already leasing small fields to be used as smallholdings and allotments. For example in Kenton, smaller plots, usually of an acre, had tenancies that lasted for six to twelve months, larger plots such as the five acres at Southbrook that the Westcott family farmed, had leases of seven to fourteen years.²⁶ A government report written in 1928 stated that by the end of 1926, 16,334 ex-servicemen were occupying small holdings provided under the Act of 1919 and an earlier Smallholdings and Allotments Act of 1908.²⁷ In Dawlish plots of land were provided by Devon County Council along Port Road and Exeter Road on the outskirts of the town and it was here that some of the violet farms started.²⁸

The Violet Book, written in 1922, contains instructions for the 'most important point of the business, namely the packing of plants which are to be dispatched by rail or post.' This covered instructions for lifting, wrapping and labelling plants; autumn plants were to be packed individually in paper, spring runners in rolls of a dozen, all plants packed in moss for protection.²⁹ Flowers sent to market had to be of best quality, tied with raffia, later rubber bands. Larger blooms were tied loosely; smaller blooms tied more tightly together. They were picked when the flowers were out, tied in small bunches of 20 or 25 flowers depending on size, packed in boxes of ten to twelve dozen bunches, surrounded by leaves and packed in tissue paper.

At Starcross:

Everyone in the family worked either in the garden or at home. Mum and Dad would pick the flowers etc. The violet was the chief flower with pinks and anemones. They were picked, brought home and then everyone helped to bunch and tie them. When that was completed, they were placed in wooden boxes with nice paper, about four dozen at a time. Leaves had to be gathered to put around each bunch, so, rather than strip the plants too much, leaves were plucked from the hedgerows, a leaf similar to the violet being the commonly named Coltsfoot. After the family had finished the bunching, a lot of Mums used the bath to store them as a temporary measure.³⁰

In the 1930s up to two hundred acres were planted with violets in and around Dawlish, a 500% increase in acreage. As noted above, the violet trade gave employment to whole families and many people with



Figure 1. Postcard of Covent Garden Market 1905, author's collection.

a small patch of land or allotment also grew violets and could put together sufficient for a box to go on the train. Violet growing could produce a good income on just a few acres of land. For example, in 1935 one grower in Holcombe, between Dawlish and Teignmouth, made an income of £1,300 from just three acres. That would be the equivalent of £97,000 today. Although this was an exceptional year it was not unusual for him to earn over £400 (£30,000 today) in a season. This made violets an extremely attractive crop.³¹

Most of the violet flowers were sent to wholesale markets including London, Manchester, Liverpool and Bristol, but some growers specialised in sending blooms and plants to individuals by post. The 'violet' train, known as the 'flower train' in Cornwall, left every evening taking violets and other flowers to Covent Garden Market in London (Figure 1). This was an express passenger train with extra goods capacity and, if for any reason the passenger train did not run, a special goods train would be scheduled by GWR to collect the violets and other flowers and horticultural produce.

Growers from Holcombe, Dawlish, Cockwood, Starcross and Kenton brought violets, and other flowers on foot, bicycle, horse and wagon to Dawlish or Starcross stations. During the afternoon boxes would arrive to be weighed, labelled and paid for. They were then loaded on to platform trolleys in the cool to await the train. Hundreds of boxes were sent off every day, ranging from one box of violets from an allotment grower to a wagon load from larger growers. Empty boxes, returned from London, were distributed to the growers by an agent, appointed by the local market gardeners.³² The scent from the violets was so strong near the station that tourists and locals alike would promenade along the sea-front in Dawlish, to drink in the perfume of the violets awaiting transportation. The *Western Daily Press*, quoting from the *GWR Magazine*, reported:

Spring comes from the West! Between 1am and 4am yesterday 3 million blooms of spring flowers grown in the open air arrived at Paddington Station from Scilly Isles, Channel Islands and the West of England. Packed in 11,000 boxes they included quantities of early violets grown by ex-Servicemen in Starcross and Dawlish areas.³³

By 1926 British violets reaching big city markets equalled those imported from France.³⁴ However, flower imports rose from 500 tons to 4,000 tons over the following five years. To help support the home industry the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries imposed an import duty in 1932 of 2d (1p) per lb (½kilo).³⁵ This was not a huge amount, but gave a boost to the local industry, helped by the fact that imported violets were past their best by the time they reached London. Those from Devon were picked, packed and transported in a day. The most popular variety for many of the Devon growers was the 'Princess of Wales'.

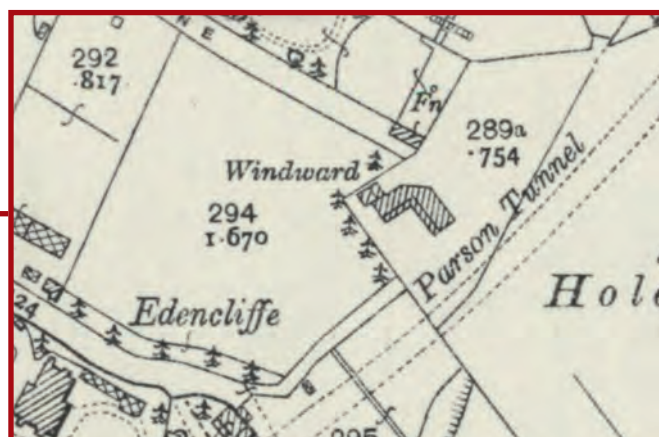


Figure 2. Ordnance Survey 25" map CX.4 Devon CX.4 Revised 1933, Published 1934. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland, showing the site of the Windward Nursery.

This was highly scented and thrived in the Dawlish area but was susceptible to the red spider mite and labour intensive to grow.

Second quality flowers and their leaves were used for a variety of products, including the famous Devon Violet perfume; 'it takes a tonne of leaves to make one kilogram of oil'.³⁶ Scented violets were also incorporated into toiletries including soap, face cream and talcum powder.³⁷ Edible products such as crystallised violets, vinegars and violet honey were also sold. Lownds Pateman, established in 1921, manufactured violet scent at Babbacombe and Torquay ware was used to pack perfume.³⁸

With no botanical knowledge, George and Grace Zambra had started Windward nursery in 1922 on the cliffs between Dawlish and Holcombe, adjoining the famous Parson and Clerk rocks (Figure 2). George collected as many varieties of plants as he could find, and Grace dealt with the marketing side of the business. Not long after starting the business, they suffered a serious infestation of red spider mite. However, Grace wrote in her book *Violets for Garden & Market* that to combat this their workmen dipped every plant in insecticide before planting. This was no mean feat as from seven to ten thousand plants of 'Princess of Wales' violets were planted every year, and this was only one of up to seventy varieties grown. The underside of leaves was also sprayed during the season to prevent further infestation.³⁹

Her book contains information on over one hundred varieties of violet. One of the Windward catalogues, unfortunately undated, listed sixty-eight varieties of violets as well as two varieties each of auriculas and bellis and thirteen varieties of primulas available from the nursery (Figure 3).⁴⁰ New introductions such as 'Princess Mary' and 'Mrs David Lloyd George' which were scented semi-double violets, commanded premium prices in London, as did yellow, pink and white violets. (Figure 4) The most expensive plant in the catalogue, 'Tina Whitaker', was described as 'Pure amethyst, very fragrant, flowers of immense size must be grown in frames.' These were sold at six shillings (30p) each or £3 per dozen. This was a Parma violet, discovered in Palermo, which had a lovely scent and two-inch flowers. It was a difficult variety to propagate as it did not grow true from seed and was slow to propagate from runners, but one of Grace Zambra's favourites. The majority of violet plants listed in the catalogue were singles. Other categories included 'Late Flowering (May-June)', 'Semi-double', 'Double' and 'Parma (Best grown in cold frames)'. Plants were priced by the dozen with 'special prices for quantities of fifty of any one variety'. Violet runners for spring delivery were sold

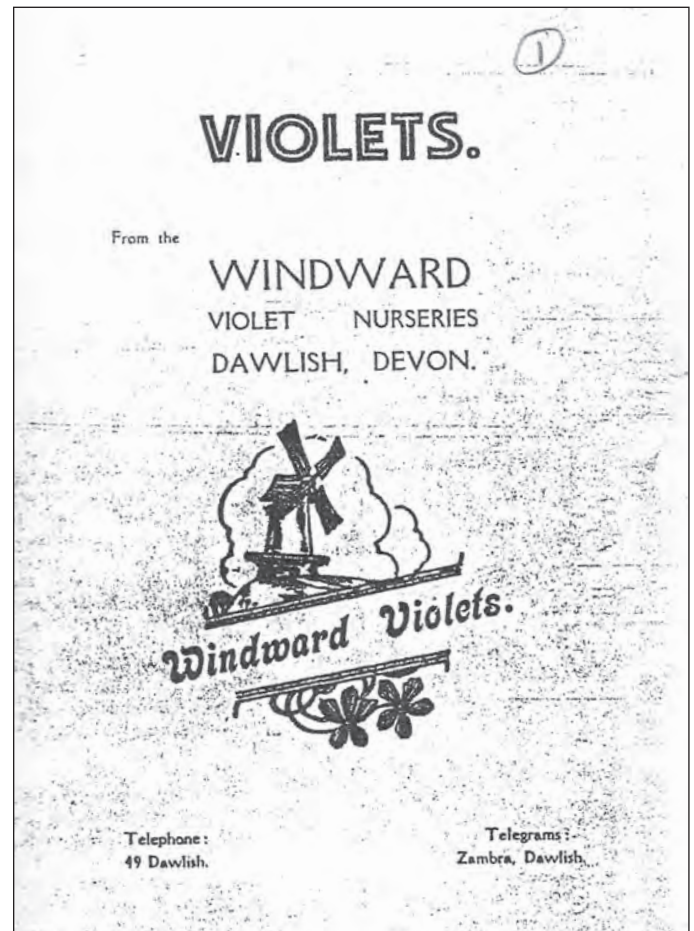


Figure 3. Cover page of Windward Violet Catalogue, author's collection.



Figure 4. Semi-double violet, 'Princess Mary' from Grace L. Zambra, *Violets for Garden and Market*, Revised edition, (London, 1950).



Figure 5. Postcard showing the Lammas Violet Farm n.d., author's collection.

at half the catalogue prices. New varieties introduced by the nursery included 'Mrs R Barton', named after the foreman's wife, 'Pamela Zambra' named for the Zambra's daughter, 'Windward' and 'Norah Church' named after a friend of the family.⁴¹

Employing pickers and packers from the area, the Windward nursery sent cut flowers to provincial markets by train from September until March. They also sent violets by post advertising 'Devonshire Violets, Boxes from 5s upwards, post free: long stems, sent to any address at any time'. These advertisements were placed in several newspapers including the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, (1926, 1928) the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* (1925) the *Rugby Advertiser* (1927) and the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* (1928). They also advertised in journals such as *Amateur Gardening*.⁴²

The other long-lived violet nursery in Dawlish was the Lammas Violet Farm, started in 1929 by Gordon and Anne Lammas at 3 Exeter Road (Figure 5). Like the Windward nursery, they also advertised extensively, including on Devon buses (Figure 6). They also placed advertisements for 'Choice Devon Violets— an ideal gift. Boxes 2s. 6d., 5s., &c., post free' in *My Garden*, and journals such as *Gardening Illustrated* as well as *The Times* newspaper.⁴³

The company grew several acres of 'Princess of Wales', alternating growing areas with anemones or polyanthus every three years. They sold plants, runners and flowers by post internationally and supplied Covent Garden and Harrods. In about 1930 Gordon Lammas bought a still to extract oil from the flowers and leaves, making his own Devon Violet perfume, though he later imported oils from France. The perfume 'was sold in little pottery containers in stone colour with brown writing on, tied with mauve ribbons (Figure 7). Eventually they changed to glass bottles which were watch shaped with paintings of different towns of Devon on them.⁴⁴ Along with the Windward Nursery they exhibited new and rare varieties



Figure 6. Lammas Violet Farm advertising on a Devon bus. Courtesy of the *Westcountry Historic Omnibus and Transport Archive*.



Figure 7. Dawlish Ware Devon Violets Scent bottle.

of violet at RHS shows and at the *Daily Mail* Ideal Home Exhibition.⁴⁵ The Lammas family encouraged tourists to visit the violet farm and it became something of a tourist destination until the early 1980s (Figure 8).

During the 1930s the violet industry expanded in Devon with many people growing violets for sale including a Mrs White of Maiden Green in Hemyock who advertised 'strong, well-rooted plants of Parma Violets from 5/- a dozen [12] and, in December, Parma violet blooms from 2/6d a box.⁴⁶ This was half the price that Cecile Macdonald, Floriculturist, was asking from Greenacre in Teignmouth in 1940 when WW2 restrictions were limiting growth of plants.⁴⁷

Unfortunately, it was partly due to the tactics of the Cornish growers that the demise of the Devon trade began. Cornish growers preferred 'Governor Herrick' which was as attractive as 'Princess of Wales' with large bright blue flowers and long stems. It was easy to grow and propagate and highly resistant to the red spider mite, it also lasted longer as cut flowers than

other varieties but had no scent. As a large part of the attraction of violets was their scent, it was said that the Cornish growers would spray their boxes of flowers with violet perfume to encourage people to buy them. However, it soon became known that 'Cornish violets have no scent' and this affected the sale of Devon violets. To combat this, 'It was decided at a meeting on Wednesday evening [12 January 1938] to form a Dawlish Violet Growers' Association to further exploit the Princess of Wales violets for which the district is famous.' A medallion was attached to boxes of violets produced by members which confirmed the contents were 'Princess of Wales' violets. The Association started with ten growers, but within five weeks had increased to eighty-five. Violets had to be of superior quality to be allowed to attach the medallion. Growers paid a levy of 10% on their net returns to go towards advertising and promotion in the *London Evening Standard*.⁴⁸

The promotion by the Association was so successful, with prices at market increased by 30% to 100%, that Cornish growers visited Dawlish to see how it was organised. As a result, they set up their own growers' association, paying a smaller levy of between 5 and 7½%, to promote, not only violets, but Cornish anemones and pinks.⁴⁹

During the Second World War, land was once again needed for food and growers were forbidden to grow flowers on more than ten per cent of their 1939 acreage or sufficient for them to preserve their stock. It became illegal to transport flowers by train as violets were a luxury item and therefore not essential. People tried to get around the law, growing violets between rows of potatoes. It was also rumoured that some men would load up their bicycles and cycle to London with violets, returning by train with their bikes in the goods van. There was still a demand for the flowers during the war, especially from American soldiers stationed in Britain buying for their girlfriends. This trade was soon curtailed as it was feared that the soldiers were giving away the location of their bases, and soon postage of flowers was also forbidden. However, there was still a demand in London for violets which led to at least one case of violet smuggling. A coffin awaited loading at a station in the west country; it was to be sent to London. Officials became suspicious because the wreaths had violets at their base, instead of moss and ferns so detectives opened the coffin to find it crammed with violet flowers. In Covent Garden a dozen bunches of violets would fetch 24s. (£1.20p) instead of 4s (20p) at home.⁵⁰ The government clamped down hard on violet growing and smuggling and unfortunately many violet varieties were destroyed and lost at this time.

The tradition of posies and bouquets containing violets

lasted from the mid-nineteenth century until the end of the Second World War, as did the use of violets for wreaths and funeral decorations. Following the war, although the trade revived somewhat, it was never at the same level. Growing violets was very labour intensive; at the peak of the violet trade in Dawlish hundreds of men and women were employed to cultivate the plants, pick and pack them.⁵¹ Violets began to go out of fashion. They did not last long as cut flowers in water; the longer lasting varieties were mostly unscented. Dawlish was still known as the centre of the violet industry in Devon, but no more than one hundred acres (40ha) were now cultivated.⁵² From the 1950s anemone growing was taking over.⁵³ The flowers were easier to pick, and to pack in bunches, they also lasted much longer as cut flowers. Competition also came from colourful cut flowers imported by airfreight from Kenya, the Netherlands and Colombia.

The Zambras at Windward Nursery concentrated on gathering as many lost varieties as possible, but the nursery closed for the first time in 1964. Charles William Groves, a nurseryman from Bridport, Dorset, purchased a share of the violet collection. The Groves nursery continue to sell varieties of violet raised in Dawlish. It holds the national collection of scented violets and is still breeding violets today.⁵⁴ Windward nursery was sold several times with some owners continuing the business. Finally, in 1989, the property was again sold and the remaining stock was dispersed.

Violets had always been popular with royalty and this did not change. In February 1982, the *Dawlish Gazette* reported that Mr and Mrs Leaman of Port Road, Dawlish, semi-retired growers, had received an inquiry from the Head Gardener at Sandringham for the supply of violet plants for the royal gardens and in April of that year they despatched 300 plants which,

... included the famous old-fashioned, large-flowered single, 'Princess of Wales', once the most extensively grown cultivar, the doubles 'Princess Marie Louise, and 'Duchesse de Parma' and another single 'Luxonne'. All four varieties are scented and were very popular in the late nineteenth century.⁵⁵

Carol Lockton was also another part-time grower and breeder in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Growing about fifty varieties, she sold pots of sweet violets from her home, situated next door to where the Lammas nursery had been on the Exeter Road between Dawlish and Cockwood. *Viola odorata* 'Carol Lockton' bred by Carol or, as she states, created by 'the bees' is mid-blue with a white throat with navy veins; it is sold by the Groves Nursery (Figure 8).⁵⁶



Figure 8. *Viola odorata* 'Carol Lockton'. Photograph courtesy of Farmyard Nurseries accessed 26 Nov 2021.

The continuing interest in violets worldwide was demonstrated by the formation of the International Violet Association in 1995, the third symposium of which was held in Dawlish in April 1997. The Hon. Secretary of the British Section, and later President of the Association, was Joan Yardley of the Devon Violet Nursery at Rattery, South Brent.⁵⁷ She and her husband Michael had taken over the nursery in 1995, and stocked

heritage varieties of violet, violet scented toiletries and sweets, including Belgium chocolates with a violet flavoured fondant filling. By 2003 the nursery was taken over by Rob Sidoli and Sarah Bunting who held up to seventy-six varieties of violets in stock. Devon Violet Nursery is now run by the Hedgeland family who moved the business to Ottery St Mary and sell plants, reed diffusers, fragrant mist sprays and pot-pourri on-line.

Thank you to Dawlish Museum, Westcountry Historic Omnibus and Transport Trust, Carol Lockton, and Carolyn Keep for their help with this article.

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