



Enhancing the Quality of Native Plants for Gardeners: Mt. Cuba Center introduces Silver Gem prostrate blue violet

BY RICK LEWANDOWSKI, March 1, 2011

The introduction of superior forms of native plants with notable ornamental appeal and garden adaptability has been a tradition at Mt. Cuba Center since 1988 and continues to be a top priority in our ongoing efforts to promote plants native to the eastern U.S. for gardening.

Our Evaluation

Plant introduction efforts at Mt. Cuba Center promote a broader availability of high-quality, improved plants for the gardening community. Furthermore, our plant introduction program explores the potential value of under-appreciated and under-utilized species that can contribute to expanded diversity in the garden. Plant introductions made by Mt. Cuba Center are typically sent to the nursery industry to be propagated and distributed for sale to the gardening public.

The late Mrs. Lammot du Pont Copeland enthusiastically supported efforts to evaluate and introduce selections that: 1. can be nursery propagated; 2. combine strong ornamental appeal and broad regional adaptability; and 3. can be distributed on a wide scale to the gardening public.

Today Mt. Cuba Center boasts more than 15 cultivars that have been introduced for commercialization including both herbaceous and woody plants. Additionally, there are several bright prospects for additional introductions on the horizon. To learn more about Mt. Cuba Center's past introductions, [click here](#).



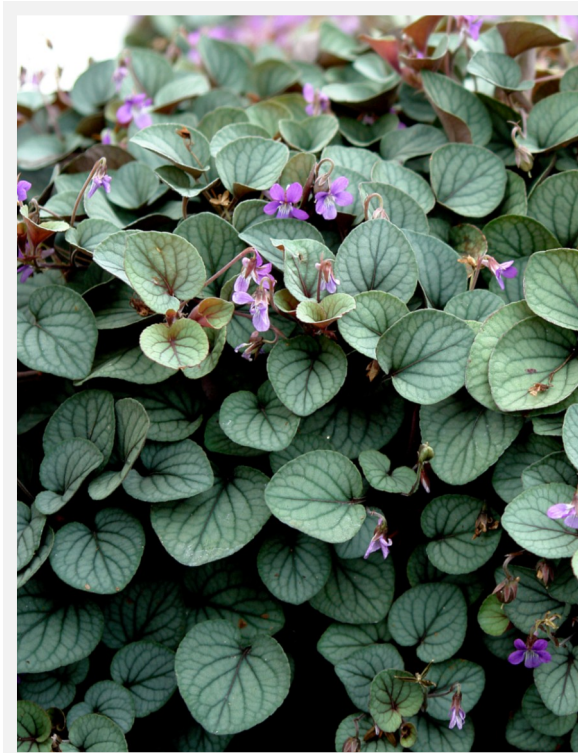
Silver Gem prostrate blue violet has been selected for its tidy mound of striking silvery colored leaves.

(continued on next page)

Our Newest Introduction

As part of Mt. Cuba Center's continuing effort to identify, evaluate, and introduce superior landscape plants, our newest selection, **Silver Gem prostrate blue violet** (*Viola walteri* 'Silver Gem'), was named in late 2010. It is being introduced to the gardening community in collaboration with [North Creek Nurseries](#), a premier wholesale starter plug nursery located in southeastern Pennsylvania with a strong emphasis on propagating eastern North American native plants and cultivars.

Silver Gem prostrate blue violet has been selected for its tidy mound of striking silvery colored, heart-shaped leaves with contrasting green veins displayed prominently throughout the growing season. Adding to its appeal, the undersurface of the leaves vary from pale purplish-green to burgundy.



Habit

This cultivar is a well-behaved low-growing, compact multi-stemmed herbaceous perennial reaching 3" to 5" tall with a 10" to 15" spreading habit. In spring it produces delicate asymmetrical flowers that are violet-blue in color and borne just above developing foliage on short stems. While 'Silver Gem' is generally deciduous in northern Delaware, basal leaves can remain nearly evergreen where winters are milder.

Growing Conditions

'Silver Gem' grows best in moist, well-drained, neutral to alkaline soils and is drought tolerant once established. In the garden 'Silver Gem' thrives in filtered shade to partial shade where it develops the best foliage color. It makes an excellent accent plant in shady naturalistic gardens and can be used as a slowly spreading, non-aggressive groundcover as long as plants are placed on close centers.

'Silver Gem' Origins

'Silver Gem' originated as a seedling variant found in nature and was collected in 2003 along a tributary of the [Little Cahaba River in Bibb County, Alabama](#) in deciduous woodlands. Despite its diminutive size, the seedling stood out, with its distinctive silvery foliage compared to numerous typical green to grayish green leaved forms of *Viola walteri* in the population.

In spring 'Silver Gem' produces delicate asymmetrical flowers that are violet-blue in color and borne just above developing foliage on short stems.

(continued on next page)

Plant Companions

The *Viola walteri* population in which ‘Silver Gem’ was first observed, grew in rich woodlands above a small stream near an exposed cedar glade (dolomitic limestone outcrop). The rich diversity of woodland companions included: *Acer leucoderme*, *Acer rubrum*, *Aesculus pavia*, *Anemone acutiloba*, *Carex spp.*, *Carpinus caroliniana*, *Cercis canadensis*, *Chamaelirium luteum*, *Chionanthus virginicus*, *Cornus florida*, *Fraxinus pennsylvanica*, *Hamelis virginiana*, *Hexastylis arifolia*, *Hydrangea quercifolia*, *Juniperus virginiana*, *Morus rubra*, *Ostrya virginiana*, *Polygonatum biflorum*, *Rhapidophyllum hystrix*, *Rudbeckia laciniata*, *Silene regia*, *Spigelia marilandica*, *Trillium cuneatum*, *Uvularia sessilifolia*, and *Viburnum rufidulum* among many others.



Spigelia marilandica is a striking perennial in the woodland garden. It is also a natural companion for *Viola walteri*.

Future Introductions

Mt. Cuba Center has many exciting prospects under assessment for future introduction as we continue to observe and propagate plants from throughout the eastern U.S. Please check back regularly to stay informed about great native plants we are developing and/or promoting for gardening.

If you would like more information about what is under development in the nursery trade or to learn more about plant introductions, join us for the following upcoming events:

[Going Native — Mini Symposium](#)

Saturday, March 12, 10am to 2pm, \$75

Registration includes lunch and a box of native perennials for you to try.

[Millersville Native Plant Conference](#)

June 1-4, 2011, check registration fee on website

Through this 4 day conference, you will increase your knowledge on propagation, cultivation and use of native plants in the Mid-Atlantic and New England regions. Many field experts are featured and plenty of native plant nursery vendors will be present for you to review.

Happy gardening!



About the Author

RICK LEWANDOWSKI, DIRECTOR

Rick has been the director at Mt. Cuba Center for 12 years and was formerly the director of horticulture at the Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania for seven years. Rick has published numerous articles about gardening and horticulture.