



Full spectrum, full throttle

Japanese breeder Isao Sato's Twilight collection has bolder colors of red, purple, and pink, with strong contrasts between light and dark across each petal which creates an impressive supernova effect on the blossoms. PHOTO COURTESY OF TAGAWA GREENHOUSE

New developments from breeders are keeping pansies at the top of color annuals race

BY JOSHUA LAPOINT

In the world of color annuals, pansies have been a top performer for many years, their popularity buoyed by their cold tolerance.

But plant breeders have kept them at the forefront of the marketplace with breeding that has extended the range of colors, improved flower structure, broadened the range of colors and varied plant structure.

This has helped keep them on the top of gardeners' and landscapers' must-have lists.

Cold tolerance

Pansies have a cold tolerance that sets them apart from virtually every other plant because they will bloom throughout the winter in many regions.

"One year in the early '90s, it was down to 4-5 [F]" reminisced Don Kondo, owner and president of greenhouse grower **Yoshitomi Brothers Inc.** (West Linn, Oregon). "We'd left a few flats outside in the wind and the cold and they survived when a lot of other things didn't."

Pansies actually prefer cold weather, and it will cause them to create tighter, more vibrant blooms. Even snowfall and temperatures in the single digits will not stop them from blooming.

The typical pansy season is from early October through May, while many other annuals and perennials only have color starting in April or >>



In 2027, the breeder is launching a brand-new collection called Dawn to Dusk. Dawn to Dusk took the stark contrasts of the Twilight collection, then removed the reds and pinks from the color palette. It has bright gold or sharp blue-white colors in the ruffles with purple or blue accents, and a dark face to highlight the contrast. PHOTO COURTESY OF TAGAWA GREENHOUSE

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Pan American Seed's Pansy Top Wave™ Blue Blotch and Top Wave™ Rose Blotch trails and mounds, making them great for containers. PHOTO COURTESY OF PANAMERICAN SEED

May and going through the summer.

It cannot be overstated how important these cold-hardy color annuals are to the annual growers' business model. "Pansies are a season extender for color annuals because of the cold tolerance," said Ron Newble, small plant sales manager at Tagawa Greenhouse (Brighton, Colorado). "Pansies can carry you over the winter months."

Annuals are an extremely seasonal business by nature. The busiest months occur in spring, when garden centers are humming with business and landscapers are going full speed ahead. Pansies are one of the few plants that allow growers to extend their season. This product line gives them increased revenue and momentum to help carry through the winter months until the next spring shipping season.

Pansies have been bred to bloom in virtually every color imaginable — red, blue, purple, yellow, brown and even black. "If you need a color, there are pansies that come in that color," said Brenna Estrada, owner of Three Brothers Blooms (Camano Island, Washington) and AHS Book Award winning author of *Pansies: How to Grow, Reimagine, and Create Beauty with Pansies and Violas*.

Pansy flowers can be ruffled, soft, giant or even have smaller blossoms that

are common with a trailing growth habit. Trailing habits are the preferred choice for hanging baskets because they create a waterfall of color. Dense, mounding habits are the most widely grown because their larger bloom size and thick form makes them ideal for mass plantings.

"A lot of people use either clear mix, which is a solid color without a blotch, or a blotch mix," explained Steven Engel, regional account manager at PanAmerican Seed.

With so many different colors, breeders have undertaken great effort to ensure that each of the colors within a given pansy series will bloom at the same time. "The most important trait is the evenness of bloom," said Jon Venzke, general manager of **F&B Farms & Nursery Inc.** (Woodburn, Oregon). "If I plant them all at the same time, they should be ready at the same time."

If the bloom times are not synchronized, the intended effect will be thrown into disarray. Thankfully, after years of careful breeding, the blooming times are now very consistent, with all the colors within a given series opening within a week of one another.

Deep-seeded traditions

Several of the most popular series currently in production are the Matrix

and Delta series for mounding habits, and the Cool Wave series for spreading pansies. These three lines represent a fantastic amount of pansies sold across the country and are responsible for countless installs every year.

Newble, with Tagawa Greenhouse, noted that they ship over 50 million units of pansies annually, with the majority of these being the Matrix series. It is an important part of their color annual mix.

Although both Matrix and Delta series have a tremendous amount of production power and market demand, there is no clear winner between them. Growers favor both and appreciate the value they each bring. "We grow some of Delta and Matrix," said Jennifer Martin, the program development administrator at **Walla Walla Nursery Co. Inc.** "We do a catch all to grab all the main colors with clear face and blotch."

For Kondo of Yoshitomi Brothers, consumer demand guided their decision to start producing Matrix. "Our customers demanded that we did a larger flower pansy and we started the Matrix line," Kondo said. "It's been very important for their breeders to come up with a series that are timed very well so you could grow a crop and have everything in full bloom within a week, rather than two and a half weeks."



The trailing nature of Top Wave™ makes it easy to spread. PHOTO COURTESY OF PANAMERICAN SEED

“Our go-to series is the Matrix from PanAmerican,” said Venzke of F&B.

Although PanAmerican Seed produces a plethora of annuals, “Matrix has been our biggest seller,” Engel said. “It’s our series with the largest color range in it.”

Delta has its fans as well.

“The Delta series has been very successful for us,” said Ben Verhoeven, president of greenhouse grower **Peoria Gardens Inc.** (Albany, Oregon). “They mature and come to market looking the same and at the same time.”

The Delta series by Syngenta is very popular, with their Delta Pro flowers marketed to be very short with large flowers and nice uniformity.

“The Delta series has been a strong workhorse,” said Estrada, adding that she admires the series for their big, beautiful faces and jewel tones.

Spreading and trailing

While the retail market has adopted both series of clumping pansies, perhaps the most quintessentially “color annual” items they carry are hanging baskets. These are often a combination of different annuals, colors, and textures.

The Cool Wave series of spreading pansies by PanAmerican Seed has impressed customers in this application for years. Their spreading habit allows them to trail down from the basket to create a waterfall effect. Their blossoms tend to be smaller and tighter, but they still showcase many brighter gem colors and softer pastel tones so there is a pansy for every application.

PanAmerican Seed, in concert with Ball Horticultural Company, has improved on this and launched a new series called Top Wave. Top Wave is like Cool Wave’s big sister. “This is a spreading pansy with large flowers that also mounds so you get color throughout the entire plant,” Engel said.

Kondo of Yoshitomi Brothers agreed. “It’s another dimension to be able to have them fill out a basket and drape over the edge,” he said. “These new Top Waves have 25% larger flowers, which is significant at close to a 2-inch flower.”

Between the combination of mounding/spreading habit and the increased flower size, Top Wave promises to make a huge impact in hanging baskets this year. »

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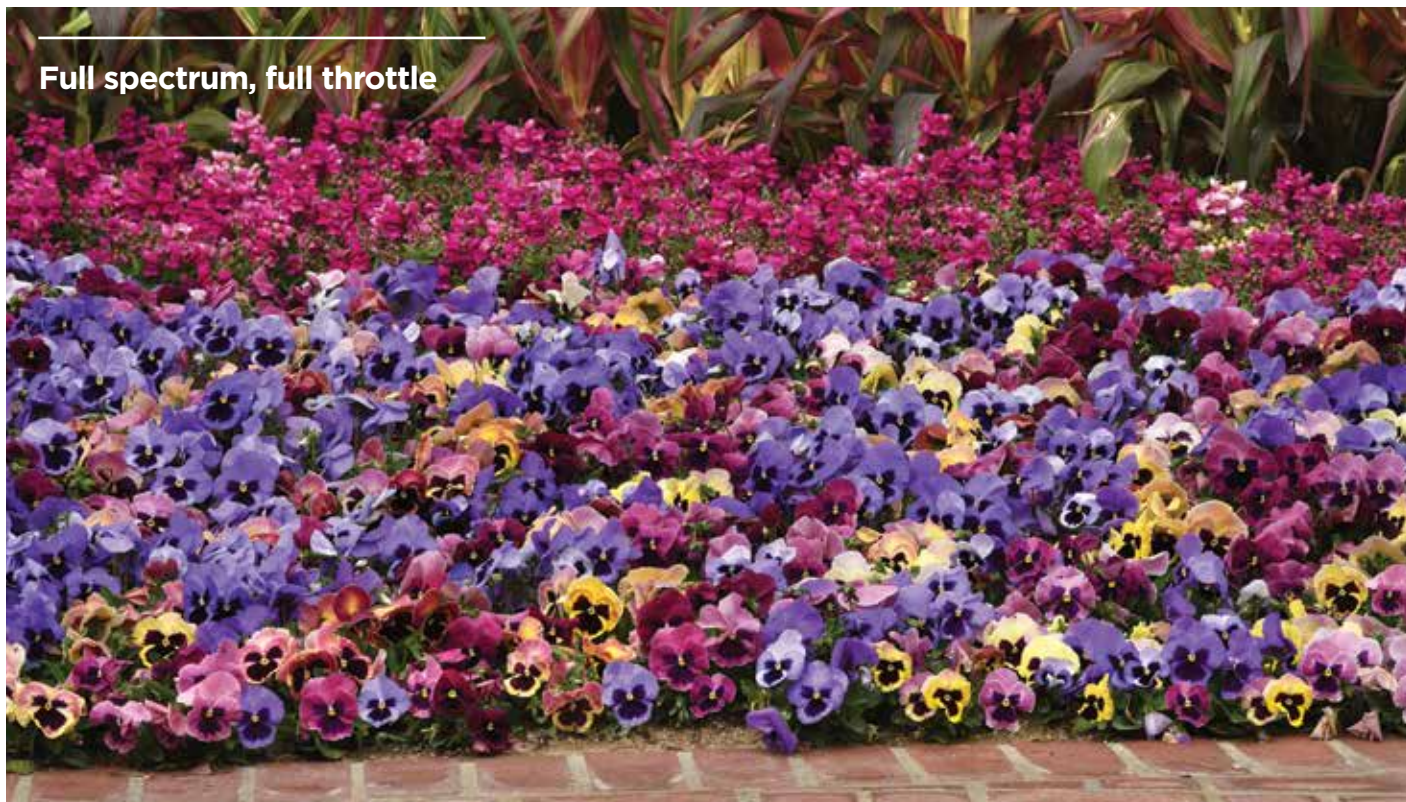
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Although PanAmerican Seed produces a plethora of annuals, Matrix has been its biggest seller with the largest color range. PHOTO COURTESY OF PANAMERICAN SEED

Nature finds a way

Because pansies have experienced such overwhelming demand as bedding plants and hanging baskets for over half a century, further development efforts have focused on developing the characteristics that made them so attractive to begin with. These include their color, bloom size, and form. A retail market for semi-double ruffled pansies has also been quietly gaining prominence.

In markets around the world, such as those in Japan and Italy, pansies are often used as cut flowers in beautiful bouquets. Growers train spreading varieties to grow upright, resulting in stable, long stems that are ideal for small and medium-sized bouquets. This has driven specialty breeders to focus on developing pansies with color that will capture the eye from across a room, then get more aesthetically complex and beautiful from a closer distance.

The classic series sold in the U.S. is called Frizzle Sizzle. “We’ve sold a fair amount of a seeded variety called Frizzle Sizzle for years,” said Kondo of Yoshitomi Brothers.

In Italy, breeders and growers have been producing beautiful varieties like Chianti and Moulin Rouge. These have ruffled petals, interesting color, and an understated beauty that has been popular

in Europe for years but is just gaining traction here.

“Their fragrance goes back to that original *Viola cornuta* and tricolor,” said Estrada of Three Brothers Blooms, “with a beautiful, intense chocolate fragrance with a hint of honey.”

Ornate botanical elegance

Just when the genus seemed improved to the maximum, a radical new introduction from across the Pacific made a big splash at the California Spring Trials (CAST) earlier this year. Isao Sato, a specialty breeder from Japan who spent years breeding Japanese pansies, made a breakthrough with one of the most visually stimulating pansy series ever created, aptly named Elegance.

In 2026, Elegance had two distinct collections. The Antoinette collection features a beautiful mix of smoky pastel and light-colored petals of soft elegance, reminiscent of Enlightenment era paintings. The Twilight collection has bolder colors of red, purple, and pink, with strong contrasts between light and dark across each petal which creates an impressive supernova effect on the blossoms.

Sato is continuing to build on these new introductions. In 2027, the breeder is launching a brand-new collection called

WHAT THEY'RE GROWING

In addition to pansies mentioned in the story, here's a sampling of what nurseries are growing.

Wall Walla Nursery Co. Inc.

- *Viola Elegance* 'Antoinette Collection'.
- *Viola Elegance* 'Twilight Collection'.
- *Viola wittrockiana* 'Frizzle Sizzle Blue'.
- Matrix® Midnight Glow Pansy (*Viola wittrockiana* 'Pas736727')

Peoria Gardens Inc

- *Viola wittrockiana* Cool Wave® Mix
- *Viola wittrockiana* Frizzle Sizzle® Mix
- Matrix® Midnight Glow Pansy (*Viola wittrockiana* 'Pas736727')

F&B Farms and Nursery

- Cool Wave® Blue Skies Spreading Pansy
- Cool Wave® Fire Spreading Pansy
- Cool Wave® Frost Spreading Pansy
- Cool Wave® Golden Yellow Spreading Pansy

Yoshitomi Bros. Inc.

- Pansy Top Wave™ 'Purple White'.
- Pansy Top Wave™ 'Marina'.
- Pansy Top Wave™ 'Elevation Mix'.

Dawn to Dusk. Dawn to Dusk took the stark contrasts of the Twilight collection, then removed the reds and pinks from the color palette. It has bright gold or sharp blue-white colors in the ruffles with purple or blue accents, and a dark face to highlight the contrast. “They’re pretty wild,” said Verhoeven of Peoria Gardens. “I’ve seen them in person. They’re very eye catching.”

“Elegance pansies brings that value and that more premium option and level to the pansy market,” said Newble of Tagawa Greenhouse, noting that they are exclusively available to consumers through independent garden centers. Tagawa Greenhouse is the U.S. licensee for propagation so growers who supply independent garden centers can buy Elegance plugs from Tagawa Greenhouse through their Ball Seed sales rep via WebTrack.

As Elegance captures market share and attracts new customers, those independent retailers are in a unique posi- »



Walla Walla Nursery Co. Inc. is one of the Oregon nurseries growing Elegance Antoinette Collection pansies which showcase pastel colors. PHOTO COURTESY OF WALLA WALLA NURSERY CO. INC.



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tion to use their expertise to create lifelong plant-lovers. “We need to have them go to garden centers,” Martin said, “where they can tap into that knowledge of the garden center employees so they become confident in their gardening.”

Walla Walla Nursery Co. Inc. is one of the Oregon nurseries growing Elegance pansies.

Momentum in the market

For color annual growers nationwide, demand for pansies remains consistently strong. “They’ve always been an important part of our mix,” Verhoeven said. “They’re one of the few annuals that is not just a spring annual but can be a fall annual as well.”

There are very few plants that perform well in the winter and provide vibrant, early spring color.

“Pansies are such a diverse plant, they can be used in containers, landscape plantings, cut flowers, and even for culinary practices too as the flower is edible,” said Josh Dick, marketing and project manager with Tagawa Greenhouse.

In 2026, several colors emerged as clear favorites. “Yellow has been the most popular color last year for us,” said Verhoeven. “Citrus colors are always really popular, yellow, orange, and white,” said Kondo. But the popularity of colors can also shift with the season.

“Yellow is a strong color but in November, you’re thinking more whites and blues,” Venzke said.

For her cut flowers business, Estrada said the Chianti shade has been the number one top-selling variety. With so many colors to choose from in fall of 2026 and spring of 2027, the color plant of choice

will certainly be pansy.

Pansies get more beautiful as temperatures drop and fill a critical gap in the color calendar. They are also diverse enough to create new colors, forms and uses. While the heavy-lifting mounding varieties brighten landscapes by the millions and hanging baskets draw enthusiastic customers, specialty series open new markets and spark the imagination for what is possible. After earning its place as a staple of the color market over many years, this tough little flower still has plenty of growing left to do. ©

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