

March 2014

The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

A free download from www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net

This now the fourth issue of this newsletter and I am delighted with the response it has drawn. It is all about sharing information and I am always pleased to receive comments and questions.

The next scheduled newsletter after this would be May but I regret that will be impossible as I will be travelling overseas for the whole of that month. That being the case, the next issue will be in July, although I will try to make it earlier. I hope to have some photographs from the Convention of the African Violet Society of Canada, and any other African violets I may meet on my travels.

Note that some of the photographs in the Newsletter have been taken from the book "African Violets for Everyone", where more photos and information are available. Visit www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net to purchase.

In the meanwhile, see page six for a super special for Mother's Day.



Nancy Leigh

perfect in pink

Double white large star/pink-blushed eye. Medium green, plain, ovate. (Sorano)

Some African violets are noted for their beautiful growing habit that makes them ideal show plants, some are renowned for the number of flowers they produce, but others just have exquisite flowers. 'Nancy Leigh' is one of those whose flowers are just individually perfect.



My African violet collection is a constantly changing selection of plants that I just love, and some that I am trying out to see whether I love them. I dispose of some because I have had them for a long time, and acquire others, sometimes getting back some that I grew years ago and would like to have again. So from time to time I find that I have too many of one colour and other colours are very poorly represented.

Just at the moment that colour is Blue. Not that I mind, since blue is my very favourite colour for African violets, along with pink, red, white, fantasy, etc of course. It is just that it is a pity to look along a shelf and find just lots of different shades of blue. That's what recently happened when I looked at a shelf of miniatures and young trailers. I clustered some of the plants together and took the photograph at the head of this article.



Photographs from the top: Enigma, Optimara Stockholm, Biara, Winter Ice. Immediate right: RD's Cavalier.





This is Corroboree - my all time favourite in the dark blue-purple colours.

Some of my favourite blues:

Well, there are so many but let's see – in standard rosette African violets I like Colonial Port Lincoln, East Wind, Corroboree, Milang Skies, Bluey, Harbor Blue, Optimara Stockholm and Rebel's Valiant. I could go on. I am still growing and enjoying Blue Boy, one of the first ever named African violet hybrids. There are also the blue bi-colours like The Alps, Enigma, Rainbow's Quiet Riot, Heinz's Stargazer and Heinz's Harbour Lights. Frosted Denim and Gleeful Elf are the two most reliable blue miniatures I have ever grown. Driftwood Trail is my favourite ever blue trailing African violet. Marion's Enchanted Trail comes in second. And, of course, there are all the species Saintpaulias in their different shades of blue.

But these are not the end of the story. At the moment I have found that some of my fantasy and other bi-coloured violets have turned plain blue. These sports do happen from time to time, so I just make sure to keep one that is performing correctly so as not to lose the variety. In any case the sports are often just beautiful even if they are not according to description.

A plant of the pink/lavender fantasy Chiffon Print is flowering beautifully in blue, one of my plants of Rainbow's

About Blue in African Violets:

there is no real blue in African violets. All growers eventually realise that the blue African violet is always slightly more towards the red colours – we have lavender, mauve, violet and purple all in varying intensity some more towards blue than others, but none ever getting there.

If you see photographs of African violets in a striking really blue colour then the photographer has had difficulty in getting accurate colour. It happens.

“True” blue just doesn't exist in African violets – but do we care? At this stage I at least have seen so many African violets in their own interpretation of blue to say that is enough for me! Let the “true” blue be for delphiniums and such.



Early Spring - I used to grow it, and now I look at the photo, I think I would like to grow it again. Where did it go?

Weeping Clown which should be a lovely fantasy semiminiature trailer is flowering in blue, and so are a couple of young plants of Rob's Lilli Pilli. Rob's Duststorm has lovely dark blue flowers rather than the preferred pink with fantasy.



These all look lovely, but - such a lot of blue!

But I have it under control. When I look at the leaves I have recently planted for propagation, I see lots of pink, red, fantasy and other bi-colours for the future.

Above is a flower of Colonial Port Lincoln and a plant of the miniature, Frosted Denim. At right is Blue Boy, a very old hybrid



I wonder which colour will dominate next?

Potting Mix for African Violets

I have come to believe that the most important components of any potting mix, and in particular, a potting mix for African violets are air and nutrient-bearing moisture.

What we normally think of as the ingredients – peat moss, perlite, vermiculite, charcoal or whatever special materials you might want to add are important because they provide the conditions where air and moisture is available to the plant, and they hold the plant in position.

So, the trick is to get a mix of ingredients that leave enough air spaces and yet will retain enough moisture for the plant to grow. Potting mix is generally a combination of granular materials to provide aeration, and water holding materials to provide the moisture. The granular material we mostly use is perlite, a volcanic



My Potting Mix



Peat Moss



Perlite



Vermiculite

material that is expanded by heat and can in itself hold either water or air, and by the size of the granules, provides air spaces in the mix. In the now somewhat distant past, sand was used but the grain size is relatively small so it is not as satisfactory. Sand is also much heavier than perlite.

Vermiculite is another light weight expanded material that is a good addition to potting mixes. It breaks up more readily than perlite so should be treated with reasonable care. It holds more moisture than perlite does.

For the water holding material a high quality peat moss has long been the preferred option. It is not a limitless resource, however, so it is sometimes replaced with coir peat (made from coconut fibre), processed bark or other materials. The balance between the two types of materials is what gives us a suitable potting mix.

African violet potting mix as used by hobby growers is often a mix of these three: perlite, vermiculite and peat moss. The actual proportions vary from one grower to another, but in fact equal parts of each works quite well.

It is important that the potting mix is in harmony with the way in which the plant is watered. Wick watering may draw up too much water with a mix that has too much peat moss, but this mix might be excellent for careful top watering. Wick watering and other similar watering systems work best with quite open mixes.

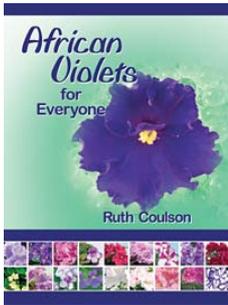
On the other hand, should there be too much granular material in the mix, it might not hold enough water, especially during very hot and/or dry weather. The potting mix I use has a lot of perlite and vermiculite and works well most of the time. During periods of intense heat or low humidity I have to check the plants very often in case the water is being evaporated away more quickly than the mix can draw it up. Fortunately this climate is mostly humid.

Note on Heavy Potting Mixes

We often talk of "heavy" potting mix not being suitable for African violets.

Note that in this context heavy does not really mean "weighs a lot" but means "holds a lot of water". If the ingredients themselves are light (perlite, vermiculite, peat moss) but a plant in the pot seems heavy, it might be too wet. If the ingredients themselves are quite weighty then this is not necessarily the case.

Some years ago I carried out an experiment to prove this point. For the granular part of the mix I used small aquarium gravel which itself holds no moisture, and for the moisture holding part of the mix I used chopped sphagnum moss. The plants in my experiment grew very well, but they were very "heavy" to lift. They did not hold too much water, though. A heavy mix that was absolutely satisfactory for the plants. There was one problem, though; it was really difficult to ensure that the heavy pebbles were evenly distributed throughout the sphagnum moss.



It's here again:
African Violets for Everyone, the book and CD at a
super special price.

Super Mother's Day Special! Only \$22!

That's more than 20% reduction

for orders received by 12.00 pm. 31 May 2014

Post and Packaging charges still apply

To purchase, visit www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net

What's the Problem with Tank Water?

This question is my own, and here is its probable solution. Always take care!

For some years I have had occasional problems with my African violets. One suggestion was that the source of this lay in the water supply. I have always used tap water but when this was brought to my attention I was surprised to find that its pH (here) is around 8.3 - 8.8. That's pretty alkaline for African violets. There was also the suspicion that the chloramine now used in the water supply (to eliminate bacteria) might be damaging the plants.

After thinking about it all, we decided to install rainwater tanks, just for watering the African violets, the shade-house and any the gardens.

The violets reacted very well and grew better than they had for some time. This improvement wasn't entirely caused by the different water. I always suspected that there was a fungal problem and I think that my repeated and regular efforts with various fungicides had finally paid off. Still all was going well for some time. We were fortunate enough to get regular rain so the tank was mostly about full.

Then towards the end of last winter the rain dried up. All we had were miserable sprinkles of a few millimetres every few weeks. The level in the tanks declined.

For our show in November last I had quite a few African violets in preparation and thought that all was going well - until in early October the leaves started to grow upwards and became thick, rigid and extremely strong. It was impossible to keep most of them in a flat shape for showing. Other plants not destined for show began to show the same effects. What was the cause?

At first I thought that it could have been the new dolomite I had been forced to

purchase having run out of a supply that I used in my potting mix for years and years. My previous supply was very finely ground and worked well and evenly. The new dolomite was (is!) rather coarse and uneven. It is rather unpredictable in use. I was thinking of trying again to find better dolomite, when another possibility came to my attention.



This is an example of the way the plants looked. The leaves became so strong that one big plant was easily able to balance upside down on the tips of its leaves. Strength is fine, but not completely upright!

I noticed one day that the water I was using was coloured like tea. Perhaps this was the cause. I suspect now that the discolouration was the final manifestation in a longish process. Earlier the water was probably tainted but just didn't show discolouration.

We finally decided that the reason it was discoloured was that the dry spell made the gum trees that surround our house flower much heavier than usual. The falling gum blossom is fine enough to sift through the guard on our gutters, and the tiny amounts of rain we had were too insignificant to even run to the by-pass,

but just kept the gum blossom debris wet enough to leach out every chemical it contained. Eventually when it did rain, there was enough polluted water to overflow the by-pass into the tank - and then: gum blossom tea!

I have no idea what the actual changes within the plants were and no way realistically to find out. I leached many of the plants with tap water, and all were watered with tap water from early December on. The change has been marked. Some few plants were so badly affected I discarded them. With the others I have now been able to remove the older distorted leaves and after a quick bit of repotting they are doing well.

This isn't scientific but the plants **are** now recovering. Now we need to have someone come in to clean out the gutters and rainwater tanks.

So be warned - you probably don't have a house surrounded by gum trees, but the lesson is that as soon as you think everything is going well problems jump up to bite you.

*I hope you enjoy this e-newsletter. You are welcome to distribute it to others if you wish. Articles reused must be acknowledged to source. There will be another in mid-July 2014. If you would like email notification of when that will be ready for download, please email me at coulson.ruth@yahoo.com.au. Otherwise just keep checking back to the website: www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net. Remember, too, all this information **and more** is available in the book - available from the website.*