

November 2014

The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

A free download from www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net

There have been a number of African violet shows in recent weeks. I don't have information about the winners in most of them, but I was at the African Violet and Gesneriad Show of the African Violet Association of Australia. There were a lot of lovely plants and many of the photographs appear on the Association's website, www.africanviolet.org.au where you can see them if you wish.

The Grand Champion African Violet was Buffalo Hunt and the next best standard African violet was Ness' Candy Pink. The Best Trailing African Violet was Cirelda and the best Miniature African Violet (including Semiminiatures) was Rob's Boogie Woogie.

These are perennial winners being such very good violets. Anyone wanting to exhibit needs to choose appropriate plants to grow. Some are more capable of being show winners than others.

Sometimes show photographs concentrate on giving an overall picture of whole plants to display their quantity of flower and wonderful shape. I find it is also great to look at the flowers in close-up. Therefore the photograph here just shows some of the flowers on a plant of Jays' Just Pink.

This is also a great cultivar with very dark green easily managed foliage and masses of these pink flowers. It is another that is born to make a great show plant.

The hybridisers called it 'Just Pink' because they felt it was just that. But it is also a great example of what African violets are capable of being.



You are invited to download this Newsletter and to enjoy it in any way you wish, of course with full attribution to source. Should you want to comment, ask a question or contribute, please email me at coulson.ruth@yahoo.com.au.

Sudden Unexpected Plant Death (SUPD)

Recently somebody I met casually said to me (on discovering in conversation that I grow African violets) “Oh! I can’t grow violets. They die as soon as I look at them.” I couldn’t count the number of people who have tossed off this piece of nonsense, especially visitors to shows and plant sales. As usual, I refrained from saying “Don’t look at my plants then, I don’t want them to die”. Instead I asked her what went wrong and tried to help.

I suspect that on this occasion my remarks fell on rather stony ground, but it did set me thinking about why African violets die so easily for some people. Indeed, most of us do have the occasional plant die unexpectedly. And as I will tell you in a moment, sometimes more than just occasionally! When that happens we either shrug our shoulders and say “Well that makes more space for the others”, or perhaps we try to find out the cause and rectify it. That is certainly the better option. Since we are in an era of acronyms and initials, I have christened this condition **SUPD** (Sudden Unexpected Plant Death).

But there is always a reason. We just have to find it.

There are many causes for the death of a previously healthy African violet. I suspect, though, that the problem, especially for less experienced growers, is root or crown rot. And that is surprising really, because no facet of the culture of these plants has been given more publicity than the facts on watering. Many people will come up with “I suppose I over-watered it”, even when that is clearly not the problem. I wonder why we keep on doing it.

So here are some certain ways to kill a plant by root or crown rot:

1. Let the plant get very dry and then flood it with water to compensate. Compound the error by doing it again and perhaps again.
2. Use potting mix with only fine components so that it holds a lot of water and no air.
3. Water the plant by standing it long term in a dish of water.
4. Use a pot with only a small drain hole, or no drainage at all.



Why do these things cause the roots and/or the crown of the plant to die?

This rot is caused by a fungus which attacks the roots and/or the stem. The fungus is more formally known as pythium, although other fungal spores may be involved too.

Here is a plant showing typical signs of advanced crown rot. Here the problem was caused by allowing the plant to be bone dry and then re-wetting it when the roots were not in a state to take up the water. So it drowned. Fungus rot invaded the whole root system.

The spores of fungus may be present in unpasteurised potting mix, in the water supply or in the air. It just takes for conditions to be right for them to flourish. Those conditions include a temperature of between 20 and 30 degrees Celsius and high levels of moisture. Combine these ideal African violet growing conditions with saturated potting mix where there is no oxygen reaching the roots and the fungus will multiply quickly. Irregular watering, over-watering and potting mix and/or pots with poor drainage all can lead to the quick death of a plant.

Sometimes it may take a while for the plant to die. Don't think that you have the thing beaten and that your plant won't suffer. Sooner or later it will.

Symptoms

One of the first things you might notice is that the outside leaves start to wilt, looking soft and droopy. The leaves will eventually turn mushy and will actually fall off. In fact the whole plant may just come away from the potting mix.

Initially this softness and droopiness of the leaves and stems is, strangely enough, caused by lack of water. Even when the plant is standing in water, if the roots have rotted off they cannot take it up. So although it looks as though the potting mix is dry it in these cases it may be absolutely saturated. Adding more water won't help. In fact it will make the position worse, if that were possible.

What's to be done?

If the plant has gone past the stage of the mere wilting of a couple of outside leaves it may be impossible to save it in its entirety. If the top few leaves are still strong and healthy, you may be able to save that. Cut the off any rotted parts with a sharp knife. Replant the clean stem in a small pot of fresh potting mix, and wait for it to grow. If that isn't feasible then you might just find one leaf that is still healthy enough to grow. If not, you will just have to think of the whole episode as a learning experience.

Of course not all plants die from root rot. Not giving the plant enough water can also be lethal. So can some other things that I am not going into right now.

How do I know all this stuff?

Well, from experience of course. Over years of growing I have had infestations of all sorts of pests, and I have been unkind to them in all kinds of ways. If you have killed a plant or two, understand you are not alone! I am not proud of these episodes, but the truth is that



And this is what happened when the leaves of the plant were gently lifted. The entire plant lifted away from the pot. I won't say from the roots, because there were virtually no roots left. There was just a rotted stump.

None of the leaves left were healthy enough to try to propagate, so the plant had to be discarded.

sometimes life gets in the way of orderly African violet growing. It can does happen to us all. For me, recently a period of health problems led me to disregard my African violets for some time. Indeed at one stage I felt that I would never be able to grow my plants again, so I completely ignored them.

When I eventually decided to deal with the situation, they were all totally dry and wilting. Having many plants, I had no option but to water them well, and wait to see what would survive.

This turned out to be a great way to cull my African violets. I now have a smaller and much more manageable collection. I have a lot of potting to do, though! So, if you neglect your plants too much, too often, it may be that, like me, you are perhaps suffering from **TMP** (Too Many Plants syndrome).

Symptoms of Neglect

Neglect I have found can cause many symptoms, crown rot being just one. Following my recent period of inability to deal with my plants there were quite a few different symptoms appeared. Most of them are likely caused by the neglect they suffered.

- 1. There were plants with "tight" centres, not caused by cyclamen mite and not caused by hot weather as it was winter. I believe the cause may have been that they had too much light for the amount of growth they could make under very difficult circumstances.*
- 2. There were many cases of rows of small leaves interrupting the growth pattern. This was obviously caused by the slow-down in growth.*
- 3. Many plants had yellowed leaves.*
- 4. I had too many plants that showed lots of side-shoots (suckers). I always feel that these form as a result of stress to the plant. Of course it does mean that I have plenty of material for propagation.*
- 5. And then there was the plant that produced the leaves you see here. Almost every leaf on the plant showed tiny plantlets forming along the main vein. Was this an indication that the potting mix had become so unsuitable for growth that the plant was propagating in the only way left to it?*

Now my problem is that with so many violets existing only as leaves under propagation I will have a lot to pot out in a couple of months time. That will be more of a pleasure than my recent experience!



Are two heads better than one?

No. Not with rosette type African violets!

Some time ago I had a question from a grower who, in part, said:

Should I separate and transplant additional plants which have grown from another plant in the same pot? OR, should I leave it alone and get a bigger pot?

I always get an uneasy feeling when inexperienced African violet growers say “I think my violets need splitting up”, as though they were talking about dividing perennials in the garden. It is so much better if you never let them get to the stage of needing “splitting up”.

For a start they will grow better if kept to only one crown per pot. Too much plant in the pot means a stressed plant. They will normally flower better as a single crown too.



And, of course, only when grown as a single crown can they attain the beautiful circular wheel-shape so prized by most African violet growers.

So why do African violets insist on producing several heads if that isn't their natural and best habit of growth? The answer to that is rather difficult, because in fact the species plants as found in the wild do often grow with many crowns. What we have to realise is that the highly developed African violet hybrids that we grow today, with all their gorgeous colours and beautiful leaves are virtually an artificial creation.

They normally produce the side-shoots or suckers that eventually become the extra plants you see in the pot because of:

1. damage to the crown,
2. stress brought on by damaging conditions, be it heat, dry, cold, etc. or
3. periods of fast growth, like when the plant is young and in the seasons on optimal growth. Here that occurs during the autumn and spring.

How do we keep them from being multi-crowned? It is usually best to remove the suckers as soon as you are sure that's what they are. If you let them grow bigger they will simply distort the shape of the plant.

Learn to recognise side-shoots or suckers when they are very small. You see, it is possible that what you see are actually flower buds, and you might not want to remove them! It is said that flower buds will usually show only two tiny leaves while suckers will show three. I generally let them develop a bit bigger just to be sure.



Above is a near perfect rosette African violet. It is called Colonial Mount Remarkable, and the leaves show splendid symmetry, having been unmarred by any side shoots throughout its growing life.

Remove the suckers with an implement that can take them out with minimal damage to the leaves of the plant. Fingers aren't a good choice of implement because it is very likely you will damage leaves. Try using a pair of tweezers, a very narrow bladed knife, a blunt pencil or even a proper "sucker plucker".

They only time you would be happy to see the suckers develop quite large would be if you wanted to use them for propagation. In chimeras this is one good way to propagate as leaf propagation won't give the beautiful pinwheel pattern that characterises these plants. Growers often cut the crown out of a chimera plant to encourage it to produce suckers. With the perversity of things in general, such plants often will not produce suckers freely otherwise. At all other occasions it is better to remove early. Use other methods of propagation.

So I had to tell my enquirer that it is definitely better to have just one crown in the pot with this kind of African violet.

And as for the suggestion that the multi-headed plants could just be planted in ever larger pots—well as most growers know smaller pots are best.

But then, what would I know?

Quite a few years ago I visited the home of another grower and was entranced by the huge trailing African violet in a 200 mm (8 inch) pot that she had as the centrepiece of her whole display. It had masses of large double pink flowers covering the whole plant.

"What is that wonderful trailer" I said. She replied with the name of a semiminiature rosette plant that was popular at the time. But she had grown it as a multicrowned plant—successfully and beautifully. I went home and tried it myself, but never achieved anything worthwhile.



If you want an African violet to have many heads—then grow actual trailing African violets like Rob's Vanilla Trail here. In the case of trailers, the more heads the better!

*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-January 2015. 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 'African Violets for Everyone' - available from the website.*