

September 2014

# *The African Violet Way*

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

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In this issue I have only two articles for you. One is about the beautiful fantasy African violets. The other is a reply to a question on whether African violet leaves should or shouldn't be struck in water.

Unfortunately I can't show you many current photos of my own violets at their present state. I have not been able to give them much attention at all over the last 4-5 months and they certainly show the signs of lack of love and care. I am now a little more capable and am trying to make up for lost time, but I fear it will be a long process to catch up. I intend to take the opportunity to reduce my collection to some extent. Don't worry the numbers will soon build up again!



One category of African violet that has continued to do well even in conditions of almost total ignore, has been the species violets. Unfortunately they are unlikely to still look good enough for the show coming up in five weeks time. Many years ago I had little interest in the species since they all were so similar. I was wrong, of course. They are vastly different one from the other and now I really enjoy growing as many of them as I can manage. The photo at the

bottom shows the selection of flowers. All quite different, as I think you will agree.

I also used to think that the single (dropping) flowers were a problem. But the top photo here shows the flowers from the lower picture, put in a vase. They lasted around ten days before any of the flowers fell. Now I am a convinced lover of species African violets!



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I recently saw a photograph of a flower that was white with a lavender blush, and covered in deeper lavender/pink fantasy markings. It also had a wide green edge. It was, quite simply, gorgeous. I can only hope that one day this beautiful thing will be available to me and I will be able to grow it. It certainly set me to thinking about fantasy African violets.

Like most growers, when I began my great African violet adventure I had absolutely no idea of the richness of colours and patterns that would eventually become available to us. When I first saw a fantasy violet flower I fell in love with it, even though way back then fantasies were pretty ordinary by today's standards.

A friend told me about one called 'Chocolate Chip' which was pink with darker (supposedly chocolate-coloured) markings on it. I immediately began the search and eventually found someone who was growing it. I started with one treasured leaf and from it grew a succession of plants over some years. There was another violet I grew at much the same time that was lavender with darker blue markings. The name has been lost to me over the time but I know I enjoyed it just as much.

These single-looking pansy shaped flowers were pretty plain and

***What is a fantasy African violet? It is just one whose flowers have spots, splashes and/or streaks that are of a different, contrasting colour. This sort of flower patterning does happen in other plants, of course. I believe that since we grow African violets indoors we are closer to them and more able to enjoy the wonderful variety of flower colour, shape and size.***



ordinary compared with the luscious flowers we see now. They seemed to be the best available then, but now we have fantasies that are edged in other colours and plain colour flowers edged in fantasy; fantasies that are also chimeras, and fantasies that are also thumbprints. There is no end to the beauty and the variety. Even the nature of the markings has extended. Rather than just spots, sprinkles, streaks or splashes of colour we have the puff fantasies where the fantasy is usually a lighter colour and the markings appear in rounded “puffs”.

Fantasy flowers are found on all sizes and shapes of African violets, whether they be large rosette types, miniature or semiminatures or even trailers. And they are equally at home on plain green foliage or on variegated. The flowers themselves can be single or double, large or small, ruffled or plain, violet- or star-shaped and anything in between.

I remember one of our hybridisers asking me some years ago what I would wish for in a new African violet. Facetiously I suggested he produce for me a double star-shaped flower in a dark blue or possibly a fresh green with rich yellow fantasy markings. Or the reverse would do. Unsurprisingly these flowers haven’t appeared. So far. For all I know it might arrive any day! And I will grow it and enjoy it when it does.

I have put some of the fantasy African violet photographs that I have to hand along the side of this article. There are more out there. So very many more. All waiting for us to enjoy.

So now you know I am enthusiastic about fantasy African violets. But the question remains: are they in any way different to grow?

The answer to that is well, no, not really. You use the same potting mix, watering system, and care practices. The only thing is we may run into trouble because fantasies are fairly sensitive to temperatures. Not as far as their growing is concerned – that isn’t what I mean at all. They will remain healthy in the same range of temperatures as other African violets. It is just the amount of fantasy markings, the clarity of those markings and the richness of the colours is often much less in really hot temperatures. Or, looking at that differently, these characteristics are much enhanced in temperatures at the cooler end of the range that suits African violets. On the next page there are two photographs of ‘Playful Spectrum’ that demonstrate its behaviour at different times.

Another factor to consider is that fantasy African violets seem to be even more prone to mutating than plainer flowers. I never consider this a fault. Mutation in African violets is the origin of many beautiful colours and lovely flowers. Mutation occurs when there is a change in the plant’s DNA that produces a different plant and this difference





**Above:** *The two faces of 'Playful Spectrum', a Paul Sorano hybrid - summer at top and winter below it.*



**Above:** *Don't get excited. It doesn't exist - yet. But I can dream, can't I?*

can be reproduced in the subsequent offspring. African violet growers commonly call these mutated plants "sports".

The changes because of temperature that I described above are not mutations. They are purely seasonal and will reverse when the conditions change. Real mutations usually show up as a sudden and amazing (to the eye of this humble grower) change in the flowers. Mutations do occur in the leaves, but in the flowers is the most common.

Mutations will occur when one (or more) plantlet of several that have been grown from a leaf has a totally different characteristic. Or, it might be that with a plant that is flowering "true" to its description, one part of the plant, perhaps just a flower stem is quite different from the rest of the plant. When this plant or part plant can be propagated you have a new cultivar.

In fantasy African violets there is a common mutation where a plant that has previously produced flowers with smallish spots on a plain background, now produces large irregular patches and splashes. I find it hard to know which of those I like the best! But chimera mutations are also fairly common. With a fanciful mind it is easy to tell yourself that there are such beautiful colours in the flower that they just like to rearrange themselves from time to time.

Sadly they also may mutate to a plain colour, usually the colour of the fantasy markings. These plainer flowers are often not as appealing as the "true" colouring, so we often discard them. Do take care not call the mutated plant by the name of the original. The original name applies to the plant performing according to its original description or merely temporarily altered by cultural conditions.

These fantasy African violets have beautiful flowers and have such wonderful potential for even more beautiful flowers to come.

## A question about propagation of African violets

*I recently received an email from a new grower asking about propagating African violet leaves in a jar of water. Many general books about indoor plants in general suggest this method. Why then do I say to use potting mix?*

Here is the answer I gave.

It is perfectly possible to put leaves in water to produce roots. In fact it has the advantage that you can see exactly what is happening. You can marvel at the formation of roots as they begin as tiny swellings on the bottom of the leaf stem and quite soon produce a network of fine threads that are the roots. If the leaf stem is left in the water after the roots have formed then you can even watch the production of tiny plantlets.

This is the problem. Those little plantlets will usually be rather weak and the minute leaves will be water-logged. Although they can often survive and even thrive when they are finally removed from this submarine life they are not usually anything like as strong and healthy as plantlets off a leaf that has been growing in some sort of potting mix. So therefore it is best to take the leaf out of the water as soon as it has produced a reasonable lot of roots, and transfer it to a small pot of regular potting mix, or possibly 50-50 vermiculite and perlite. This just seems like doing extra work since it is easy enough to plant the leaf in potting mix to begin.

One grower told me that he believed leaves rooted in water had a better success rate and less rot than leaves rooted in potting mix. This may suit you if you are having trouble keeping leaves from rotting away instead of producing plantlets. A better solution, I think, is to use the vermiculite/perlite mix mentioned above. There is little likelihood of rot with this mix. I used it myself for many years.

Another lady—who grew lovely plants—told me that she planted the leaves straight in her normal potting mix. To quote her: “That’s what they will be growing in later, so they might as well get used to it in the beginning!” I thought this was tough-love indeed, but tried it and I have used my potting mix for propagation ever since. I hasten to say that potting mixes and watering methods vary and it might not suit everyone in all circumstances. You will need to try it before deciding whether that is for you.

I have to confess that I do sometimes, even now, root leaves in water. In a sort of involuntary way. If I have a leaf that needs to be potted up but don’t have time to deal with it straight away, I stand it in a glass of water. It can a long time before I actually do the job, so that roots will have already formed. If this happens I just transfer it carefully to the potting mix, trying to spread the roots out well as I do it. I always think it is probably better to keep the mix more moist than normal for the first week or two to help the roots to make the transition.

Planted in spring, the best time of all for propagating, a leaf need only take a couple of months to come to the stage seen in this picture.



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