

January 2015

# *The African Violet Way*

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

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Here is another edition of “The African Violet Way”, the newsletter about our favourite flower.

It is mid-Summer where I live and the biggest thing to contend with is the heat. It’s difficult for many African violets and can be especially difficult for the grower.

I often find that the heat of summer plays havoc with the flowers. Some trailers and miniatures end up with tiny undeveloped flowers that don’t look good enough to keep. Geneva edged flowers sometimes lose that edge and fantasies often have less fantasy. Thumbprints can lose the white component of the flower and bloom solid.

Try to keep them cool, but they seem to know how hot it is outside. Oh well—just take off the flowers and wait for autumn.

I suppose some of you are struggling with really cold weather. Let’s hope for milder weather soon.

## *Super Summer Special*

### **African Violets for Everyone—Book and CD**

At the moment we have a very special offer to purchase this. Until and including 31 January 2015, the price is only \$22.00 AU. Two copies purchased together cost \$40.00 AU.

Normal Postage and Packaging charges still apply.

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***Emerald City***—S. Sorano, 1995. Single chimera pale lavender sticktite pansy/green stripe. Medium green, plain.

*I noticed this when looking at some old photographs the other day. Don’t grow it now. I wonder why?*



*It’s so easy to discard the old to make space for the new—and then so difficult to get the plants back again. To say nothing of the difficulty in finding space for them!*

*This photo was obviously taken with a flash, which I don’t usually think is good, but I rather like the sparkly appearance of this.*

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## *T.L.C. & Trailing African Violets*

Recently when I was working with my trailing African violets I was thinking of a conversation about these plants that I had with a friend of mine a good many years ago. She grew excellent violets and I remember her saying something like *"You always need to take some action with a trailer, whether it is removing dead flowers, off-size leaves or even pinching out the crowns. You just can't give a trailer too much care"*.

And she was absolutely right. I think some of us tend to give rosette violets good care but because trailers don't need to have such exact symmetry we may sometimes leave them to their own devices too much. I know that I have been guilty of this from time to time.

I used to grow much better trailing African violets than I do now. I have given it some thought and my conclusions bear out what I just said. In the house I lived in some years ago I had a dining room that was also an excellent spot for growing African violets. It had windows around two sides of the room but those windows were sheltered so there was little direct sunlight although it was very bright. Obviously I needed shelves at window-sill height so that I could grow some African violets there. So I soon acquired some stands that had a shelf at the correct level, and a shelf underneath with fluorescent lights. I loved this arrangement. It was like living, or at any rate dining, in a flower garden. Many of the African violets that I grew on the shelf that had light from the windows were the trailing African violets. The plants appeared to love it just as much as I did.

Why? Well natural light seems to me to be really well suited to growing trailers. With a trailer you need to have as many different crowns growing out from the base of the plant as you can get, and as many branches with new crowns growing from them and so



*Happy Trails has been a favourite of mine. The old and not very good photograph above shows a fairly good plant I grew sometime around 20 years ago. Below is a plant grown in the last few years. Perhaps a better photograph, but an inferior plant, having been accorded much less care.*



on. The more crowns there are the more flowers there are with a trailer. An idea that is quite different from that of growing rosette plants to only one crown for maximum flowering.

When mature, I like a trailing African violet to present a ball-shape with the pot all but hidden by the foliage and flowers. At a window the light comes naturally from the side as much as from the top and this encourages the parts of the plant that trail down around the pot to grow and flower. Of course it is necessary to turn the pot on a regular schedule so that all parts of the plant get the same amount of light over time.

So that's one reason my trailers did well at that time. The other reason relates to what I said at the beginning of this article. Lots of regular care! As these plants were right where I saw them every time we had a meal I couldn't help noticing if the water needed topping up or replacing. It was clear to me when they needed any attention at all. And best of all, I actually gave them that attention. At night after dinner I would often sit down at the table again, select a trailer and putting it on a mat on the table would give it a thorough grooming, including removing old leaves, dead or dying flowers, anything damaged or of bad colour, unwanted growths and so on. Where necessary the leaves were brushed to get any dust off. I would also take the opportunity to get a clean water reservoir and fill it up with fertiliser solution. Any that needed to be repotted were marked to be done at the first available opportunity.

There were probably about thirty trailing plants on the shelves there in natural light. Even if I only groomed one per night they all got attention each month. In practice I looked at more than one each night so they got looked over and worked on very frequently indeed. The results



*More recently Happy Trails has been superseded in my affections by Cirelda, a really beautiful pink trailer. The photograph above is of a plant **not** grown by me, but which the Best Trailing African Violet at the African Violet Association of Australia show in 2012. It may be seen on their website at [www.africanviolet.org.au](http://www.africanviolet.org.au). The grower gives his plants extreme and precise care.*

*The plant below was grown by me with no particular care. Lovely enough to enjoy, but note the difference!*



were good. I won quite a few prizes at that time.

So this isn't really an article about how to grow trailing African violets. It is more about the benefits of regular care. It applies to any of our plants. At that earlier time I was growing show violets. Now I tend to just grow the ones I love for my own enjoyment. I must hasten to say here that I do enter them in shows anyway, because they can be good presentable plants. They just don't have the same chance of winning major awards. The difference between show violets and "ordinary" violets is mostly just the amount of Tender Loving Care.

I could say all this thinking has led to me to resolve that my trailers, at least, will in future be regular, even perfect, care. But I won't say that here. I mightn't be able to live up to it!

*Don't let any of the above hold you back from growing African violet trailers, though. They are some of the most worthwhile plants ever, as these photographs attest.*



### *A question about drying out a plant before repotting*

**A correspondent asked:** *I have been told to let my African violet dry out a little before attempting to repot it. I am afraid that if I do it will be damaged. Do I have to let it get dry?*

**My reply:**

The advice to allow the plant to dry out a little before repotting doesn't mean to let the plant get so dry it wilts. Letting the plant dry to the stage of wilting is always a bad thing. The idea is just to let the potting mix become a little drier so it can be removed from the roots more easily. At the same time if the plant is a little on the dry side the leaves will not be so turgid and thus not so likely to damage during the repotting process.

Having said that, if you are more comfortable not to let your plant dry out, then you don't need to. It is perfectly OK to repot the plant when it is fully watered.

One other thing that could be mentioned here is that when you repot, it is good to use a potting mix that is at least slightly moist. Dry mix can draw the moisture from the delicate root hairs and damage them. If you prefer to use a dry potting mix, lose no time in providing water for the newly potted plant.

## *But where can I grow them?*

Many people think in terms of a windowsill for houseplants, especially African violets. In my experience the windowsills in most houses are not wide enough for a mature flowering African violet. It is the place to start, though. But when you run out of windowsills or the plants grow too large, what then?

First you need to give some thought to the conditions that African violets really need to grow and flower properly.

Here are five things that I thought of to help decide where to grow African violets. There will be others factors. These are in no particular order.

**Temperature** – probably you would not put your African violets in the hottest area of your house (unless you live in an extra cold climate and need the hottest spot to keep the plants happy). Not in the very coldest spot either (unless you live in an excessively hot climate and need that cold spot so the plants don't show heat stress).

African violets are said to do best at a temperature range of 16 to 25 degrees Celsius, but I find they will tolerate greater extremes than that. In fact they will often even thrive in conditions outside that range. This might depend upon the particular cultivar. Remember too, that if the plant has grown in particular conditions from when it was small it will do better than if it is suddenly transferred from a more "ideal" set of conditions to somewhere quite different.

**Display** – If you have the chance to grow your African violets in an area where you spend a lot of time, so much the better. If it is an area where visitors can see them and admire so much the better. And, from personal experience I can tell you that if you do grow them in such a space rather than locked away in another secluded room of the house, you will be much more motivated to keep them in tip-top condition.

**Convenience** – remember the plants have to be watered and tended to in other ways. If it is too difficult to get to them the chances are that some watering and grooming will be forgotten.

When I was just learning to grow trailing African violets I found they did very well on my bedroom window-sill. That was excellent, except that the window was over two metres from the floor (around 7 feet) and was above the bed. I had to stand on the bed with water can in hand, and, well, spillage was frequent. I gave up that idea quite soon. I really needed to find another, better windowsill.



*Secret Love—I Fredette. Double white and blue ruffled pansy. Medium green, plain, scalloped.*

*With violets like this, you know you just have to find a place to grow them!*

**Economy** – Some people grow on specially built light stands and some even have separate rooms built especially for their African violets. But not everyone can do that. Many of us are looking to get the best possible results from the least expenditure – at least for some part of our growing career. See below for some unusual and economical ideas.

**Light** – one of the more important factors. It is best if the plants receive bright light (bright enough to cast a sharp shadow) rather than direct sun, and that they have this bright light for around 10 to 12 hours per day. If the space you would like to grow African violets isn't bright, or can't be lit in some way just find another spot. Where there isn't enough light the stems will grow up rather than flat, the flowers will be sparse or non-existent, leaf colour will be pale. When you feel ready to extend your hobby you can think about growing using artificial light. This is naturally more expensive but grows the plants very successfully, as well as making a real display point in your home.



*Healthy African violets have flat even growth, rich green leaves and plentiful flowers. If your plants are growing as well as this, the conditions are fine!*

**How do you know whether the spot you have selected to grow your plants is the right one?** It's easy. Just wait and see what the plants do. They will tell you if they are happy or not. If they grow well and flower profusely the spot is obviously perfect.

Don't, though, underestimate the tendency of your collection to grow. Not only do the plants grow larger and take up more space, but the numbers increase. I have only known one serious grower who was able to set a permanent limit on the number of plants he grew. Most of us find ourselves having to cope with at least an occasional population explosion. It is very hard to resist the numerous beautiful plants that become available. You will very likely have to find more (and more) places to house your plants. No house, anywhere, has enough windowsills!

Take the case of a lady for whom my husband built a stand of three shelves with lights for each shelf. The shelves measured approximately 1200 mm by 600 mm (or 4 feet by 2 feet). Now that might seem like a lot of space – but it isn't really! This lady was a new grower and said she wanted separate switches for each shelf so she could turn off any shelf that wasn't being used. Although I pointed out this wasn't really going to happen, it was what she wanted and thus was just what she got. In conversation some years later she admitted that none of the lights had ever been switched off from the first day! In fact she went on to acquire many more light stands and grew wonderful plants that became a great hobby for her.

So, granted that you are likely to eventually have many more plants than you have at present, how can you accommodate the "overflow"? A house has only a limited number of windows, so you may have to stop relying on them to light your African violets. Don't forget the bright area below a skylight, by the way.

**Can you grow plants in a porch or verandah?** That will entirely depend upon the climate. You will need a cool aspect in a warm climate. In a temperate climate they might get far too cold in

winter at night. Remember the temperature requirements of the plants. And especially keep in mind you need to think about the minimum temperature overnight and the maximum temperature in the middle of the day. If you decide to try such an area for growing, a screened porch is best because African violets can be attacked by any outside bugs around – caterpillars, aphids, grasshoppers and so on.

**Can you grow African violets in the garden?** It has been done, and clearly it will depend upon the climate. Even then, the open garden is probably not a long-term solution of what to do with excess plants. I would resist putting any plant I wanted in the open garden.

**So if they can't really be grown outdoors in a temperate climate, where can they be grown?** Here are some ideas.

### **Indoors:**

When you run out of places with good natural light do think about growing on a light stand. These can be any size that works for you, your space and the lights you can get. You can have a single shelf unit that you put on a table top or something of the sort, or up to a four tier stand with lights on all shelves. The lights have normally been fluorescent tubes, but now the possibility of LED lights should make it much less expensive to grow by artificial light. A light stand can light up the darkest corner of the house, can be put in a basement (in places where basements are used!) or in many other parts of the average home.

There is an article in the May/June 2014 issue of "The African Violet Magazine" (African Violet Society of America) called "Closet Violets" that describes an instance of growing African violets inside a closet. I heard of someone who converted an old wardrobe into a light stand and I know people who have turned part, or all, of their garage over to growing African violets. Of course when your children grow up and leave home there is the possibility of a whole room not being used for anything else!

### **Outdoors:**

Where temperatures can be controlled appropriately some people have used a separate small outbuilding. This is especially economical if some of the roof is a transparent material to let in enough light for some violets without having to run artificial lighting.

One grower I have known had a small area, a pathway really, between his house and his external garage. He roofed over the top with polycarbonate sheeting, filled in the ends, installing a door in one end. Everything was painted white to maximise light reflection and fairly narrow shelves were installed along one side. There wasn't enough space for shelves on both sides. Of course, even in a mild climate this became a little too cold in winter, but still many,



*A simple arrangement on a table with just space for half a dozen mature African violets.*

many great African violets came out of that small area over the years.

Twenty years or so ago we found out that you could grow very well outdoors in polystyrene boxes (the sort in which broccoli comes to the grocery). Although the polystyrene is thick and a good insulator, it is semi-transparent, allowing enough light through to keep plants going for some time. The polystyrene is not water tight, though, so beware if you try using them indoors. I used some of these myself for a while when I had a serious over-population problem. I think it is best for small plants in small pots. If they are well watered but not necessarily dripping they can be placed in the boxes, in the sun where the plants will continue in good condition for many weeks. They don't grow very much but they do stay healthy.

Another grower took the use of these boxes to extremes, stacking them four and five high in his back garden. He made holes in the sides to allow more light in. To keep bugs out he covered the inside of the holes with fly-mesh. These "towers" were tied together strongly so they didn't blow away, the polystyrene boxes being very light weight. They proved excellent for small plants and propagation.

So never, never say you have nowhere to put African violets. They are very easily accommodated and very adaptable. You probably already have some ideas of your own. And your favourite handyman can probably make these a reality or at least make some suggestions.

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### *Taffeta Petticoats*

S. Sorano, 07/28/1994 *Standard—semidouble pink star/white edge. Medium green, plain, ovate.*

This has been a favourite of mine for some years but I'm not sure about it's future. I had three small plants of it. Two have bloomed without the white edge. I am waiting for the third to show some flowers. As you can see it can have a nice ruffled look, but it isn't anywhere near as interesting without its distinctive white edge.

What I need to evaluate is if the two plants that have flowered have been affected by our current hot weather, or whether for some reason it has completely and inexplicably changed its nature.

If the latter I do hope somebody close-by has one so I can start it again!



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