

July 2015

The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

A free download from www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net

I have recently come home from San Francisco where I attended the Gesneriad Society's Convention in Oakland. What a surprise to find the weather turned so terribly chilly while I was away! The first day we were in San Francisco it was rather cool. I remember saying that if that was a San Francisco summer day that it was very similar to the winter weather I had just left.

The weather there warmed up, of course, but here—colder than I remember for a long time. Serves me right, I suppose!

While I was away my African violets were pretty happy. It seems they don't **always** need me to hover over them! I hope yours are also doing well, wherever you are.



Did I say I was cutting down on violets?

Well, yes, I did. I do realise that I can't cope with as many plants as I used to. If I had fewer plants I would be able to give each one its proper amount of care.

But cutting down is extraordinarily difficult. There are so many good plants I haven't grown yet. And so many that are still to take their turn as my favourite.

This one, called 'Flutterby', is currently in favour with me. Such a pretty pink and white bicour it even has good, easily managed variegated leaves. It is a Margaret Taylor hybrid. I have had it for a year or two and it hasn't disappointed me yet.

I removed all flowers and buds before going away. It is just starting to flower again. Beautiful!

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Hug Your African Violets

Environmentalists are sometimes spoken of (unkindly) as “tree-huggers. There can’t be anything wrong with loving plants and wanting to protect them. Actually I don’t hug trees – but I do hug African violets. Well sort of . . .

Plants can be some of our best friends ever. They are beautiful. They help oxygenate the atmosphere. They are quiet. You can share all your secrets with them and they never tell. They cheer you up when you feel blue and so on and so on. So many very good reasons to hug your African violets. I do it myself. Quite often, in fact.

If you think you would look really silly hugging a plant, here is the way I go about it and why.

Do you remember that minor root disturbance usually gives the plant a boost in growth? When you repot, for instance, even if you try not to disturb the roots the plant seems to grow on speedily from that time. I find the same thing happens if you leach, which in itself is a minor disturbance of the roots. I have been told that a plant dropped on the ground will often have a growth spurt to follow, although as you might imagine I don’t make a practice of doing that.

Even if it isn’t repotting time you can give your African violets a growth boost. Every time I pick up one of my plants I gently squeeze the pot. This loosens the potting mix and stimulates the roots in much the same way as a careful repotting does.

And it is so easy. If you pick up a plant to groom it, to water it or simply to admire it, give it a squeeze. It’s a little hug. I believe the plants really appreciate it.

Some growers have told me that they don’t like to leach their plants because it might compact the growing medium. So what is the solution? Give them a squeeze after leaching to loosen the mix again.

When you need to remove a few outside leaves this can leave a short bit of exposed stem. You can either top up the potting mix a little—or just squeeze the pot a few times to ruffle up the mix so it covers that tiny exposed area.

This is only really possible in modern day thinner plastic pots. It is so good to find a reason to like these cheaper type pots. Older pots, even plastic ones are too solid to squeeze. And another thing to remember is that all plastic pots do become brittle over time. Squeeze **gently** because cracking the pot would mean you had a potting session ahead.

So, hug your plants. They will love you for it!



A Question About a Broken Leaf

I am trying to root a leaf from my variegated leaf African Violet. The stem broke off flush with the bottom of the leaf. Is there any hope of this leaf rooting at the stem coming from the base of the leaf? I have put root-tone on the edge of the leaf and have it in vermiculate mix. Has been there 3 days now and still perky and crispy looking. Any chance this will be able to root?

African violets are really tough little plants, despite their bad reputation! Your leaf has every chance of producing a nice set of plantlets.

What you have done will probably work perfectly well. Sometimes you might prefer to cut away part of the lower leaf each side of the stem (sharp knife) to create a new "stem" from the centre vein. Then you just go ahead as you would have had the leaf not broken.

As you have a variegated leaf there can be issues with that you would need to deal with if your temperatures are cold. In winter these variegated leaves tend to produce babies with very little green in them. That means they lack chlorophyll and cannot function when separated from the parent leaf. Should you end up with a bunch of little white babies, just keep them on the mother leaf until the weather is warm, then repot the entire lot into another pot. This will stimulate the growth and you should get green leaves.

When that happens just divide the plantlets and pot each one separately into its own little pot.

And certainly don't ever despair because the stem broke. I have even managed to get plantlets from a tiny tip of a leaf.

Propagating from Flower Stems

Well, I tried to get back to doing this trial, but I should have known better than to do it in June, one of the cooler months of our year.

I was going overseas at the end of June to be away for three weeks. One of the things I did was to set up the experiment again just before I left. All the little pots were placed safely in a propagating box under the lights. The weather was still fairly warm, as winter here usually is. I expected most propagations to have rooted well by the time I came back.

Disaster, though! I didn't allow for the fact that as soon as I left the weather turned really cold, colder than it has been for years. And I wasn't here to do any coddling when the temperatures fell. The result ruination—most things were dead. I think the pots were a bit too moist for such cold temperatures.

Everything else was fine, I'm glad to say. But I will leave propagation experiments until October. That would make more sense!

Let's Think About Pistils and Stamens



I imagine everyone knows that the *pistil* is the female part of the plant and that the *stamens* are the male parts.

The *pistil* is made up of 1. the *stigma*, which is the receptive tip, 2. the *style*,

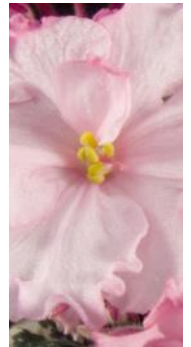
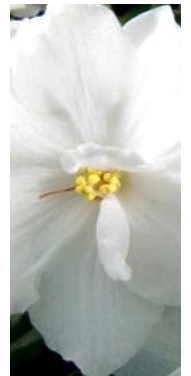
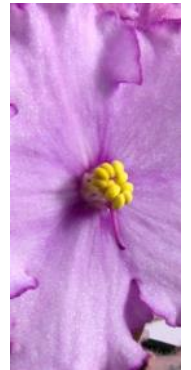
the tube leading down from it to 3, the *ovary*. The *stamens* are made up of the *anthers* which carry the pollen and 2. the *filaments*, fine structures that hold the *anthers* in place. There is normally only one pistil per flower but there may be many anthers.

You probably knew all that already. If you have any ambitions to ever hybridise with your African violets knowledge of these reproductive parts of the flowers is essential. In fact I am not thinking of hybridising at the moment, but more of the appreciation of the flowers.

You will also be familiar with the anthers as the pollen carrying part of the flower if you had ever had flower thrips in your collection. This is where they love to be. Their presence is often only evident because of the pollen that they spill on the petals while they feast on the pollen. Controlling these pests is difficult. I think it is an ever-present curse. Let's put that aside for the moment, though and look at flowers.

It is also common knowledge that the petals of flowers are just there to attract pollinators—bees, birds, bats or whatever else. But that doesn't prevent us from appreciation of their beauty. However we often pay no attention to the stamens and the pistil. I think they are an important part of the look of the flower. Of course, in double African violets like the one on the top right of the article it is really difficult to find the pistil, and sometimes there are only residual anthers as the others have been modified to become the double petals.

When I started growing African violets I didn't have today's wide range of different cultivars available to me. But I was completely bowled over by the simple beauty of plain dark coloured flowers with a distinct bright yellow centre (the anthers). Rhapsodie Elfriede was a part of my life for a long time. Now its place in my affections has been taken by Corroboree, at the top left of the article.





When you grow plants indoors as we do with African violets a wonderful opportunity opens up. We have the chance to look at even the smallest parts of the plant and study them at close quarters in a way we rarely do with plants in our gardens. So take some of your African violet flowers and really study them closely.

So, look first at the anthers. They are the yellow (or yellowish) bits, the pollen sacs. In some flowers there are two, in some four or even eight. And the colour varies from a rich or bright yellow to a very pale cream.

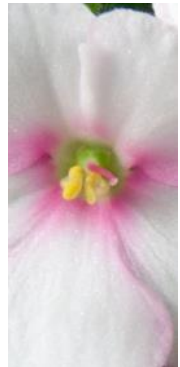
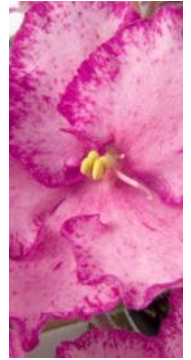
Now looking at the stigma, notice how the colour of this changes. Sometimes it is the same as or in harmony with the flower colour. Other times it is just so pale as to be almost white. Sometimes the stigma is of such a dark rich colour that it makes a statement all by itself. Most stigmas are straight but others have a distinct curve or hook.

As an example, the three plain white flowers whose photos accompany this article are entirely different in their stigmas and stamens. Check them out.

Possibly these varying colours are just a result of hybridising and would play no part in attracting pollinators in the wild. They do enhance the beauty of the flowers to us, though.

The last photograph on this page, bottom right, is a semiminiature called RD's Dorothy. This plant was exhibited at the Annual Show of the (now defunct) Central Coast African Violet Club around ten years ago. I have kept the photograph because it so well illustrates the decorative value of the pistils. In this plant the pistils are dark pink. They stand out so well on the lighter central parts of the flowers. They are an integral part of its beauty.

We are incredibly fortunate to have such a range of beauty to appreciate in these plants. And that's without even thinking about the petals, or the leaves.



One of the special beauties of flowers of species African violets is the bright yellow stamens and the conspicuous pistil.



African Violets for Everyone (with CD)

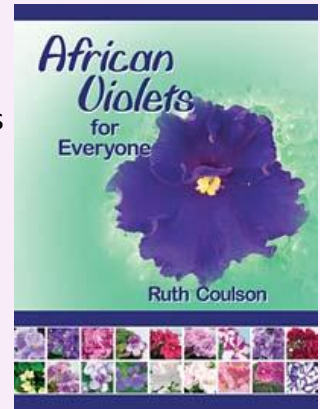
A book to guide your African violet growing

Of the 90 pages, there are 12 pages of photographs that carry 81 photographs in full colour, illustrating African violet plants and flowers, pests, diseases and problems in African violets and growing techniques.

The accompanying CD includes all the images appearing in the book plus many others. There is also a presentation of both African violet and other gesneriad plants and of growing information.

Price is \$28.50 AU, plus postage and packaging.

To purchase, go to the website orders page at: <http://www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net/how-to-order.html>.



Fisherman's Paradise

It sounds a bit like a get-away-from-it-all holiday spot doesn't it? Bring your own fishing gear or rent ours . . .



But it isn't. It's an African violet—of course!

It is an old one —The entry in "First Class" reads Double dark lavender/purple edge. Variegated, pointed, frilled. It was registered by Barbara Sisk in 1982.

That makes it 33 years old this year. But what does age have to do with it? It is just beautiful. The foliage variegation is as lovely as any you would ever see. And it is easy to grow that foliage to a show quality plant. While the flowers aren't huge they sit nicely on the leaves, with the colour suiting the foliage beautifully. I got it some time in the 1980s and grew it for around 30 years until it made way

for something new. The photograph is of a young plant that was just starting to come into flower. It was probably the last plant I grew of it at the time.

Recently I was asked by a friend if I knew anyone who was still growing it. I didn't at the time but eventually one did turn up. I was able to acquire a leaf not just for my friend, but one for me too. So now I'm growing it again—well the leaf is potted up thinking about making babies. Since it is winter I am doing my best to keep it really warm as I know it has a tendency to produce all white plantlets in winter.

It will be so good to have this oldie back in my collection.

African Violet Display

I grow almost all my African violets in a separate room in my house. Now this means that I don't see them unless I go to the plant room, or bring some into other areas for a short "vacation".

For instance I sometimes like to have an African violet on the shelf in my bathroom, or perhaps as a table decoration if I have a small dinner party. So how to display them? Just in the growing pot isn't really quite good enough I feel.

What I often use is the little bowl in the top photograph.



It was actually made by my aunt in 1935 as a beginners piece when she was learning to make pottery. There's a lot wrong with it as a bowl: It's a little bit uneven and the glaze is variable from pink to lavender to a mottled blue. Why would I keep it? Well the family association, of course, but beyond that it is the most "African violet friendly" of any container I can imagine.

The round, fat shape of it is just right to echo the roundness of a rosette African violet. I slip the violet in its growing pot into the bowl, having chosen one that isn't so big it will obscure the pot. I should say here it is quite small and thus ideal for miniature and semi-miniature African violets. The colour of the glaze with all its imperfections has a chameleon quality so that it echoes the colour of whatever African violet I put in it. Mauve, lavender and lilac colours are exactly right, but it also works for pink, white, dark red and so on. It neither overwhelms or is overwhelmed by the plant.

My aunt died around the time I was born so I never met her, but I guarantee she would not credit just how much her practice piece is valued now, 80 years later!

Another thing I like to use is this glass bowl. It is supposed to be for goldfish, but I think miniature and semiminiature African violets like it much more than they would. In this case I have put some water granule balls in the bottom of the bowl and sat the pot within them. Of course it is just as easy to use moss, pebbles or other material instead of the water balls. I actually have some plastic beads that are a perfect colour for African violets, so that's always an option.

Whichever way I go about it, both these ideas seem to make much of little, as far as the plant is concerned.



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