

March 2015

The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

A free download from www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net

Once again I have a special offer for you on my book "African Violets for Everyone". Please see the last page for details.

I have been working very hard on my African violets lately, and at last I am seeing some reward. They are coming back to life after having survived near the brink after a couple of longish periods of neglect. When the weather gets a little cooler they should be even better.

I am not allowing them to flower very much at the moment because I want them to grow good leaves first. When I first started with these plants I was told by a very experienced grower that the thing to do is first grow the roots well, then grow the leaves well, and lastly let the flowers grow themselves.

Another reason I am not letting them flower is that I am going away for a couple of weeks holiday and they may as well just grow while I'm not here. And yes—I will be avoiding all staircases while away as I don't want this holiday to end as disastrously as the last one!

Isn't this splendid?

It is called Den's Isabella, a chimera sport that occurred in the collection of grower in Sydney and named for his wife.

I am very lucky to have been given a plant of it so soon, and I'm really enjoying it.

The flowers aren't all the same but they are all a good range of lavender colours.



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What can you do when your plant just doesn't grow?

Before deciding what is to be done, the first thing to do is to work out what is the cause of the problem. There are many reasons for African violets not growing at the expected or wanted rate. They are all to do with creating the best possible conditions for the plant, and keeping it healthy.

- Starvation - Lack of fertiliser. You wouldn't expect your children to grow without food, so don't expect your violets to do so either. It is best to use a dedicated African violet fertiliser and use it at the recommended strength, or even a little weaker. Too much is as bad as or even worse than too little fertiliser.
- Drought - Being allowed to be dry. Every time you let your African violet go dry will stop growth for the period of dryness. If they are dry enough to wilt, there is a good chance that the little root hairs that take the water will have withered, so there is an even longer wait for them to regrow before the plant itself can continue to from where it left off. Let the plant wilt for too long and you will find that the outside leaves will die. Another reason for the plant not reaching a very large size.
- Pots too small – this will inhibit growth as the roots cannot make healthy growth. Sometimes a huge plant will grow in a small or smallish pot, but don't count on it.
- Presence of many side-shoots (suckers). There was a time when even quite respected gardening “gurus” would tell us to pinch out the centres of our violets so they would grow bushier. Believe me, except for trailers, bushy is not what we are looking for. Preserve that centre, and try to make sure the plant has only one crown. That way the leaves can radiate out and grow to their potential.
- Lack of light is definitely a cause. Adequate light is needed for the plant to photosynthesise – that is to process the fertiliser that is given to it.
- Light too intense seems like a contradiction of the previous point. But it isn't. Adequate light is what is needed. If the light is too intense the leaves do not expand because they are able to gather enough light at a slightly smaller size. This is not a way to bonsai the plants, though. Because I have found that the leaves tend to layer up, one row above another rather than growing out. I have only ever seen this with plants grown under artificial lights. Plants grown by natural light are more at risk of sunburn.
- Cold temperatures, especially for variegates. There are optimum temperatures for African violets, and even though they can become accustomed to temperatures a little lower, they will certainly not grow as quickly. Variegated African violets sometimes become all white/cream rather than having any green. When they are without any green, or very little they are not going to be able to carry out photosynthesis and will certainly not grow. They might not even survive if in this condition for too long.
- Pests or infestation are another likely cause. If your plant is not in perfect health it cannot be expected to grow as you would like. Various things will have an impact. Mite infestation destroys the central growing point so naturally growth pretty much stops. If the roots are

infested with soil mealy bugs the plant will lose vigour and although the difference may be imperceptible at first, the plant growth will eventually suffer. Root rot or crown rot will naturally stop the plant from growing because the root system is lost.

This is not an exhaustive list of the problems that may slow down the growth of an African violet, just some of the most common ones. In each of these cases the remedy is obvious. Just correct whatever is wrong with the growing conditions. Control all infestations or even discard plants with pests if control is too difficult.

There are cases where the cause of the problem is not obvious. You can try giving such plants a quick boost to growth by repotting. Not necessarily into a larger pot, unless a larger pot is needed. The root disturbance involved in repotting will usually encourage the plant to grow. Don't do this repeatedly, though. I knew of one grower who when told to repot his plant so that it would be encouraged to start growing, came back the next month and complained "I've repotted it three times and it still won't grow!" Poor little plant!

And, of course don't be in too much of a hurry. Some plants grow more slowly than others and nothing can hurry them. If gardening in any form is to teach us anything, it should teach patience.

Ah! African Violet Shows

There is nowhere like an African violet or Gesneriad show as a place to see African violets, to learn about African violets and to meet other enthusiasts. There is nothing like the plants at a show to whet your appetite for ever more wonderful plants. And it is a remarkable thing—I have always found the people running shows to be so helpful. I think all African violet growers are really terrific people. So expand your knowledge, your collection and your friendships by attending any African violet show you can.

If you are a member of an African violet group or society, you will already know about their shows and no doubt participate in them.

If you are not a member of an African violet society it is never too late to join one in your area. Or at least attend their shows or other public activities.

*Why am I telling you about this? Well I want those who can to come to the Annual Show of the **Hunter Valley African Violet Society** to be held on Saturday 2nd (1pm to 5pm) and Sunday (3rd 10am to 4pm) May 2015. The show is at a new venue this year—Club Kotara (formerly The Kotara Bowling Club) at 2 Howell St., Kotara (Newcastle). See the Society's website for more information: www.africanviolets.org.au.*

It's bound to be worth a visit. These accompanying photographs were taken at earlier shows held by this Society. Hope to see you there.



Just Reminiscing

Are today's African Violets any better than those of yesteryear?

Sometimes I am gripped by nostalgia and want to see again the faces of the violets I grew years ago. This is a symptom of growing older, perhaps. But you know, I really did enjoy those earlier plants. I can't swear that I would find them as attractive if I had them now, but I'd like to try – well sometimes I would.

And that's the trouble, isn't it? We become greedy for the new cultivars that our wonderful hybridisers are constantly producing. In order to grow these beautiful offerings it's out with the old and in with the new.

Some few of the plants that were grown widely (here anyway!) thirty and more years ago are still seen from time to time. Most have disappeared into nowhere.

Quite a lot of the plants I had in my early growing life were Optimaras and Rhapsodies. Many of them were not named but were good performers. Of the named ones I particularly liked the Rhapsodies named for the planets, especially **Rhapsodie Venus** which I remember as having medium pink star shaped flowers and **Rhapsodie Neptune** which had semi-double mid-blue flowers. Only a couple of years ago I found someone growing **Rhapsodie Neptune**. Another, **Optimara Louisiana** (1987 Single light pink ruffled) I still grow today. **Ballet Marta**, **Ballet Ulli** and **Ballet Anna** (all registered in 1976) I remember as being very popular, making fine show plants, with flowers in mauve/purple, blue/purple and light pink respectively.

Other violets I remember with affection were:

Granger's Wonderland (registered in 1978) Blue star shaped flowers, good show plant (for its time, I suppose)

Lavender Delight (Eyerdom, 1972) Lavender pink flowers with a little darker speckling. I loved this plant. It was robust (another way of saying it grew huge, quickly) and it flowered incredibly well. It won me quite a few awards at the time.

White Delight is not listed in First Class, but it was a sport of Lavender Delight with all its good features but with flowers in pure white.

Peach Frost is also not listed, but it had nice flat foliage and peach pink flowers.

Nona Weber (H. Rhoades, 1967) This is still listed in First Class and described as "Semidouble red-orchid star/rays to purple or lavender edge". It was one of the first named plants I ever grew and I thought it was wonderful. I exhibited it in a show in 1982. I had an opportunity to sell it and since I was going to have difficulty in carting all my plants home I did so. I took a leaf off for propagation, and then promptly lost it. I hope someone out there still grows it. I would love to at least see a photograph. I wonder how I would rate it now?



Ballet Anna—such lovely pale pink flowers—so easy to grow and flower.

Patricia Lorraine This had really large pale pink star shaped flowers that were slightly ruffled. It probably wasn't the best African violet plant ever, but I really loved those delicate-looking flowers.

Pamela (E. Fisher, 1977) was another that I grew for a long time. First Class lists it as a double medium blue star—Large. That makes it sound quite ordinary, but it was far from ordinary to me!

Also from early times were **White Pride** (C. Ulery, 1957) and **Tommie Lou** (T. Oden, 1967) the sport of White Pride that was the forerunner of all our beautiful "Tommie Lou" type variegated plants today.

And then there were the locally (Australian) hybridised Colonial series that came out from about 1982 or so until the early 1990s. They were named for Australian towns, cities, lakes and so on. Some performed so well. One that I will always grow is **Colonial Mount Remarkable** which may be one of the best ever white African violets. But many colours appeared, including a few fantasy flowered plants. There were only a couple of Colonials that had variegated leaves as far as I know though. But they were good all round plants guaranteed to do well.

I grew hardly any minis in my early years. **Tiny Pink**, **Tiny Blue** and **Tiny Fantasy** stand out in memory – mostly because I found it almost impossible to stop them turning themselves into pots full of suckers. Miniatures and semiminiatures certainly have improved in that respect.

For me a turning point with miniatures and semiminiatures was when I grew **Irish Angel** (L. Egenites, 1980). I don't believe it was available here until 1985 or so, but it was so welcome! And then **Snuggles** (Lyon, 1982) was available soon after. All this certainly made me think differently about these small violets. Maybe they have just been improving ever since. Although . . . who could ever forget **Precious Pink** (Pitman 1985) or who would ever say it was anything but a superb cultivar? I don't have them now, but I'm sure **Precious Pink** and **Snuggles** are still around.

In trailing African violets one of the earliest I grew was **Happy Trails** (Lyon). This was registered in 1991 but was being grown at least around ten years earlier. It always did well for me and won me a number of major awards which of course cemented it in my affections. So much so that I grow it still, mostly for sentimental reasons because I haven't grown it as a show plant for many years.



*I exhibited this plant of **Pamela** back in the 1980s. I really loved it then. I'm not sure how I would feel now.*



***Colonial Port Arthur** grew rather large, but probably was able to produce more flowers than almost any other violet.*



***Happy Trails**—Everyone has a favourite and for many years this was mine. I suppose I liked it because it seemed to like me.*

But then amidst all this dreaming of the “oldies” I began wondering which of my more modern favourites would I happily do without to accommodate them? Well, none, really! But then I’m sure that at least some of them survive somewhere. At least I hope so. And I hope that some who are reading this have a love for some of the oldies.



Here are a couple of more modern African violets.

Far left: Mulberry Glow

Left: Victorian Flirt

Yes, I guess they are more gorgeous flowers than any we had in the 1980s.

Back from the (almost) dead

African violets are truly tough little plants. I can’t imagine how they ever got the reputation of being difficult. They will put up with all sorts of abuse and still come back eventually if you catch them in time.

Some considerable time ago I put a couple of leaves of the semiminiature ‘Rob’s Slap Happy’ in a glass of water to keep so I could plant them “tomorrow”. Turned out that tomorrow was a really long time in coming. The leaves had not only rooted, they had produced a handful of baby plants. The glass of water had been topped up from time to time. It was only when I realised that these two leaves were my only scraps of Slap Happy I had left that I finally did something about them. At that time the water was completely dried away, the original leaves were curled over, the little plantlets were yellow coloured because Slap Happy has centre variegation, and the roots were an inextricably entwined mass in the bottom of the glass. (See below left) This was in late November

I took the leaves out and planted the whole thing in a small pot of ordinary African violet mix. By the 4 February I was able to separate out the plantlets and pot them up. I only potted up three but there were obviously many more healthy little plantlets had I wanted them.

Now they are doing well. The variegation is showing only in the centre leaves while the outer leaves are a good green colour. (See right) I have removed three outer



leaves because they were smaller than the others. The next row could go too, but I don’t want to leave the plant with no green.

Yes, a really tough little plant.

And my growing method for this plant— a bit Slap Happy would you say?



African Violets for Everyone (with CD) at a special price

Mother's Day is coming up and it's time to give Mother a gift. Perhaps if you are the Mother you should treat yourself or make a hint to the rest of the family.

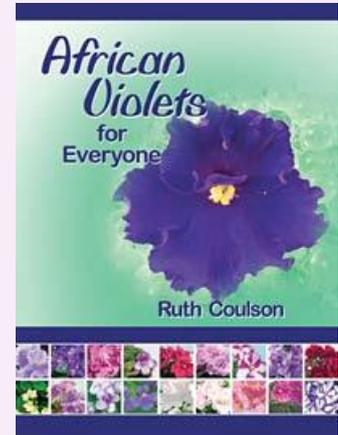
For all orders placed from now until the end of May the cost of the book will be only **\$22.00** (AU). For the same period the cost of two books will be only **\$40.00** (AU).

Normal postage and packaging charges still apply.

Despite current talk of increasing postal charges by Australia Post, I will keep the cost of postage and packaging as they are at least until the end of May.

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

Please note: We will be unavailable from 19 May to 5 April. Any orders placed during that time will be mailed out promptly on 7 April (After Easter).



Potting up baby plants

Here's a thing that trips up many growers. How many plantlets should you pot up? We all know that a leaf can produce anything from one to twenty plantlets, or even more sometimes. Should we pot them all out and grow them on? If not, how many is optimum?

Like many people when I was a new African violet grower I used to pot up lots and lots of the plantlets since I couldn't bear to see them wasted. The result was that I soon had far more plants than I could possibly handle. Now I think that potting out just three of the abundance that is available is best – one to grow, one for backup and one to give away. Even that is sometimes too many. Unless there is a good reason for it I don't pot up more.

What good reasons? Well, some African violets, fantasies in particular, don't always reproduce true to their description. In that case I like to maximise my chances by potting up more. Another reason might be if it is a new variety and I know a lot of people would like to grow it. Otherwise I try to limit my enthusiasm!



This flower of Uluru doesn't always come true in every plantlet

*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-March 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.*