

May 2015

# *The African Violet Way*

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

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Well I got back from my holiday unscathed, and my plants were happily waiting for me when I returned with lots of flowers starting, especially on miniatures and semiminiatures. This delighted me because I really like these smaller plants.

Sometimes they seem more work intensive than the larger plants but I do find it is really worthwhile. And they are space-savers, too. This is a consideration that really does matter for anyone with more plants than they should. It is never easy to fit all the plants we would love to own into the available space, or to fit caring for them into the available time.

Maybe I should specialise in miniatures and semiminiatures. They have a lot to offer. All the variations we find in larger African violets are now seen in these little darlings. But no. I don't think I could restrict my acquisitive instincts in that way!

My next newsletter may be a little late—I'm going away again. Just for a couple of weeks.

*These little plants, recently photographed, are (from left) : Rob's Fuddy Duddy, Rob's Blue Socks, Little Boy Blue, Irish Flirt, Kinglake (behind) Kalorama (a sport without the fantasy),*



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## *Is there a "proper" way to grow African violets?*

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Yes – of course there is. There are actually dozens of **proper** ways to do it.

It is a bit of a mistake to think that there is an established exact routine that must be carried out or else dire consequences will ensue. Over many years of listening to and reading the writings of experienced and successful growers discuss their methods I realise that the plants are very adaptable indeed and that many different growing methods are absolutely fine.

Take pots, for instance. I always use plastic pots because they are light weight, inexpensive and wash up easily when they need to be cleaned. I don't use ceramic pots because of the cost for my large collection of plants, and because they are heavier. Terracotta pots are the other option but they have certain draw-backs as far as I am concerned, even aside from their weight. They are porous and therefore the moisture can evaporate out through the sides of the pot so that the plant dries out very quickly. This moisture carries with it some of the fertiliser salts which can leave an unsightly, and difficult to remove staining on the pot. Fertiliser salts may also accumulate on the rim of the pot and eventually damage any leaves or leaf stems that lie on there.

And yet, I know growers who have produced some lovely plants in ceramic pots, and I recently heard of someone who has been using terracotta pots successfully for years.

Then look at potting mix. Anyone who makes up a mix for African violets ends up making something different. We may all start with a basic recipe, perhaps even the same recipe, but the mud-pie making instinct that has been dormant since childhood takes over and we start to make little changes. Will it be a bit better with a little more peat? Perhaps I should use a substitute for peat? What about a bit more perlite? And so on. Using a purchased mix is no better, since you have quite a few to choose from. And it is always a temptation to improve them by a little more of this or that. Even pH recommendations for the mix vary widely. And, you know, most of them work perfectly well. Yes, there are a few things that are standard – a gritty, well-drained mix is probably an essential for wick watering, but the constituents can be very varied.

As for how the plants are potted up . . . It is just variation all the way. How long a wick are we to use. What sort of wick material? Do we use a wick at all or do some other sort of watering? If we use a wick do we tie a knot or do we not? How far up into the pot do we bring the wick? And, most contentious of all, does the wick have to go through a hole in the very centre of the base of the pot, or can any drain hole be used? All the possible variations have their adherents.

The importance of climate should be remembered. If someone living in a warm climate recommends certain methods they may not be quite as successful for growing in a colder climate. And, of course, the reverse is also true. You really don't know whether something will work for you until you try it.

I wonder sometimes if the rituals we use in caring for our African violets are more because they satisfy us rather than because they are necessary for the plants. But that's OK; we are growing

to please ourselves, after all. Of course other growers' ideas on growing are valuable and should be considered. If our plants are not growing successfully it is a good idea to try other recommendations that might help. Or you might just feel that by doing what someone else does will result in an even better plant. Just don't get carried away – try anything new in a modest way first. Maybe just one or two plants to start with. And wait a while to see what the result is. Remember it can take some weeks to see the result of a change of method. A change of potting mix can take up to three months to show effects on the plant.

A good many years ago I had finished demonstrating to a meeting of one of the Societies that I have belonged to. I showed my way of repotting plants and when I finished a member of the audience came up to me and said "Thank you very much. That's very nice, but I think I'll just keep on doing it the proper way!"

### *The Hunter Valley African Violet Society Annual Show*

*This show was held on the weekend of 2nd and 3rd of May, as I mentioned in my last newsletter.*

*It was most unfortunate that this was a very wet weekend, and in fact was not that long after the horrible storms that had troubled the whole area a little while before.*

*While some members of the society's usual public had many other things on their minds because of the storm and weren't able to come they missed a very enjoyable show.*

*Here are photographs of three of the African violets that won major awards.*

*At the top is the Best in Show—Pink Frost Fire grown by Sandra Murray. Nobody knows the origin or hybridiser of this plant but it is a really good one to grow and frequently wins major awards.*

*The second plant is the Best Trailing African violet. It is labelled Rob's Willy Nilly but that would appear to be inaccurate. But a great plant all the same.*

*The bottom photograph was the Best Miniature/ Semiminiature African Violet, Gembrook. It was grown and exhibited by Maree Bale and the number of flowers was just incredible. Gembrook was hybridised by Sue Gardner from Melbourne.*

*I really do think that attending African Violet Shows is one of the most enjoyable ways to spend a weekend that I know of!*



## *When do I start taking leaves off?*

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I was doing some grooming lately among my violets and thinking about violets in general as I did so. Grooming can be a very relaxing exercise.

Most of what I had to do was removing small outside leaves from young plants that I had potted up a couple of months ago. In my musings I couldn't help being reminded of somebody who said to me once "When do I start taking leaves off?"

"What do you mean? Why do you want to take leaves off?" I asked looking around her perfectly grown and groomed plants. She never did explain properly and our conversation was interrupted by others present so was never completed. I have quite lost contact with this person and so at times I wonder about "When do I start taking leaves off?"

*Did she think removing leaves from African violets was a natural part of growing them?*

If she did she was pretty much correct.

- Older outside leaves that have become faded and lost their quality need to be removed. This is just natural attrition and the new growth from the centre of the plant eventually makes up for any lack of leaves.
- The smaller outside leaves that remain when a plant has been repotted and grown for a while, with the new growth rapidly overtaking the older ones should be removed as they are of no real benefit to the plant.
- Leaves that have become damaged can be removed as they are ugly and the plant is better off without them.
- Healthy green leaves on the other hand should certainly stay where they are.

*Did she want to remove the centre leaves from the plant so it would grow "bushy"?*

This was often heard years ago but I hope nobody believes it as the way to grow a rosette type African violet. Trailers are different, of course. Never, Never damage the centre leaves of the rosette because that is where all the new growth is coming and consequently all the flowers.

*Perhaps she wanted to start up selling leaves to other growers for propagation.*

In that case a certain maturity is needed in the plant before removing leaves. You wouldn't want to inhibit the growth of the plant by leaving too few good leaves on it. And of course if you are selling leaves you must supply healthy mature leaves with a good chance of propagating. The really old outside leaves that you remove because they are no longer contributing to the plant will not do at all.

Still, years later, as I go around my plants filling my leaf bucket with the groomings from my plants I wonder – what did she mean? If a leaf is good and healthy and contributing to the regular even shape of the plant it stays on. If it is not – off it comes!



## ***A Question about dirt on African violet leaves***

### **A recent question:**

*I have a collection of African violets that I have got in the last year or so. I love them dearly. As I have three children and a job, I don't always have the chance to do everything I probably should do with them. I do water and fertilise them and they usually look nice and I get flowers now and then. A friend of my mother's visited recently and she said I wasn't looking after them properly because they had some dust and cat hairs on them. I don't have time for brushing leaves like she says. Does it really matter?*

### **Answer:**

Well, yes, it does matter if you are trying to grow really healthy, quality plants with lots of flowers, but certainly does not matter enough for you to be too stressed out about.

If your plants are looking good and you do water and fertilise regularly you have made a great start. Basically I think you must consider that you are growing the plants to please yourself, not to please your mother's friend. But she is correct to the extent that if plants are clean they may well grow better and more quickly, and they might flower more. They will certainly look better to the observer whether that is you, your family or visitors.

The thing is, if the plants have a lot of dust and debris on them it does block out the light. All plants need light to live, so, the cleaner the better. In natural conditions rain and wind help to keep plant leaves clean. Indoors it is really up to us. A little bit of dust probably doesn't matter, but it does tend to build up. Larger particles on the leaves, like bits of potting mix are sometimes accused of leaving permanent marks on the leaves if they are left on there permanently. I don't actually know if that is true and I am not about to try it out.

If you can make time every now and then to sit down with a soft brush to gently clean each leaf your plants might look even better. And there might be benefits for you because it is a very relaxing thing to do. Perhaps just brush and clean one plant any time you have a little time to spare? It needn't be a major thing that takes a whole block of time. I always use the time while I drink my morning cup of coffee to do any plant "fiddling" of this kind. After a few weeks you could find your plants really starting to sparkle and produce even more flowers.

When brushing the plant, start from the centre and brush those leaves first, always working from the stem end of each leaf. When you reach the outside leaves the plant should be clean. While you are there you will probably notice any dead or faded flowers and any old or damaged leaves. These can be removed at the time.

Of course time is very scarce for you. You might not be able to brush even one plant every day. But do it when you can. It is worthwhile. But you are doing it for yourself and the plants. Not for a visitor who criticises!

These plants are for pleasure.



## *Propagating from Flower Stems*

Most African violet growers would be aware that it is possible to produce new baby plants from leaves. And if you think about it, from seeds seems only natural. Not everyone knows that it is possible to grow new plants from flower stems.

With this in mind I had an article in mind that would cover this aspect of growing. I also wanted to carry out an experiment with the various ways in which this can be done. Six or seven weeks ago I had a plant with a lot of flowers on it. It was also one for which I wanted to test out how “true” it might stay if propagated this way, as it seems a little variable.

Accordingly I took all the flowers off and stripped the stems down to just the two little leaves at the base of the flowers, as this is what is used.

I planted all these little stems and also the calyces from the flowers. Calyces, you may wonder. But yes, it is possible to grow from the calyx of the flower. I wanted to know whether there was a lower success rate if doing that, though, than using the basal leaves from the flower stems. I took some photos of what I had done, and then put them in a clear, covered container to provide humid, terrarium conditions.

A couple of weeks later we had a truly horrible storm. Among other troubles we were without power for 5 days. With the storm the weather had turned quite cold, winter having come in an instant. Of course we were most concerned with our own sufferings with no light and no heating, but when the power came on I checked out the plant room. Most things were fine, but these tiny scraps of green material were too cold and too dark and too moist for those conditions. Nearly all had rotted away. All to do again!

Fortunately the same plant is now putting up fresh flower stems so it shouldn't be too long before I can recommence my experiment.

I will get back to it, and I will write that article!

*The photographs at right show (from the top):*

1. *Some of the flower stems ready to plant*
2. *Calyces ready to plant*
3. *Three of the flower stems in a small pot*
4. *14 calyces planted in a small pot*



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

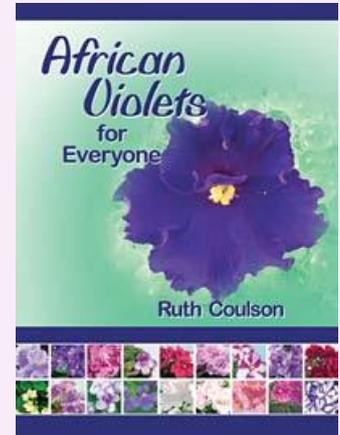
Mother's Day is coming up and it's time to give Mother a gift. Perhaps if you are the Mother you should treat yourself or make a hint to the rest of the family.

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).

*Discount still available. Purchase before 1st June 2015*

## *A Love Affair with Miniatures*



*I have always grown a lot of miniatures and semiminiatures but recently I have become particularly interested in them again. In looking through photographs taken for the book, I found the two on the left where I have massed some good semiminiatures (mainly) in a large dish.*

*Below are more recent photographs—Ness' Puppy Charms shown at a recent meeting of the African Violet Association of Australia by Adelina Wong, and at right, my own entry of Rob's Boogie Woogie (with somewhat underdeveloped flowers) in the Annual Show of the Hunter Valley African Violet Society.*



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