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The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

A free download from www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net

African violets are for pleasure

I have had an email from a reader who feels that there is not enough in this Newsletter about how to grow the plants

It is a valid point—to a degree. The fact is that there are many, many places where it is possible to get this information. The internet abounds in appropriate sites and there are books and magazines. Perhaps the best source of all is in the Societies where other growers can give lots of personal help.

My website (www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net) is also a source of information, as the book for sale there— “African Violets for Everyone”. Check it out.

My aim in producing this newsletter is only secondarily about teaching how to grow the plants. My main aim is to transmit something of the pleasure to be derived from growing something beautiful. It is mainly my musings as I go about working with my plants. The time spent potting, grooming, watering and so on are also times for quite reflection and enjoyment.

Can there be anything better than to stand in a beautiful environment with a lovely plant in hand and some wonderful music playing?

This plant is one I really love—a new one to me, it's called 'Carolina Elegant Affair'. Heaps of flowers, really pretty ones at that, and variegated leaves. What could



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The Long Road Back

I have mentioned a number of times that I had a long period in hospital last year and that my plants were therefore neglected for quite a while. Of course my husband kept up the watering in my absence, but nothing else was done. Even if he were inclined to look after plants—which he isn't—he would have had no time as he was already doing everything else I would have done as well as coming to the hospital every day.

When I came home the plants looked fairly good. I found I could take little interest, though, and couldn't do very much each day. So the plants got worse and worse. I seriously thought of giving up the whole hobby. But then one day I decided to get back into the plants.

By this time they were in a terrible state. There were some mites and heaps of thrips for a start, plus the lack of grooming that resulted from months of neglect. So what to do? How to go about my gargantuan task? I have pretty much worked my way through now so I decided to share with you how I went about it.

Pest problems

I sprayed the plants three times for mites and removed all flowers and buds to eliminate thrips, as well as spraying for that pest as well. I have kept the flowers and buds off the plants pretty well until now

Culling

In 2014 I also had a period of health problems and had to reduce my collection as a result. But not enough. It became obvious to me that I could not expect to manage the same number of plants. Certainly not in the short term, and probably not long term. While it would have been good to have made actual decisions about which plants to keep and which to discard, I am sure you realise that is a pretty much impossible thing to do. It is for me anyway. I love them all, you see.

So what I did was look at each plant critically and decide how much work was needed to bring the plant to a reasonable standard. If it required more than simple repotting, it had to go. In a very few cases I took a leaf, but mostly I didn't even check whether there was another plant of that cultivar in the collection. Of course any plant that had mite damage was tossed out early in the process. All of this certainly reduced the numbers considerably.

Repairing the damage

There were plants with old decaying leaves, suckers aplenty—and in general terms a bit of a mess. I went through as well as I could and removed all dead and dying leaves to improve the prospects of the plants that were left.

I then started repotting.

I grow African violets on light stands that actually have four shelves. I stopped using the top

shelves some years ago as they can't be reached without a ladder and I don't have a very good history on a ladder. I now decided not only to forgo the bottom shelves because bending over is difficult now, but also turned off a couple of my stands at least for the time being. This has also had the benefit of reducing the considerable heat load of having all those lights burning in the summer.

I took the plants then shelf by shelf and started the repotting regime. Mostly they needed many more old leaves taken off and this left them with necks. In some cases this led to more discards, but on the whole I just repotted and repotted. There were a few that didn't really need new pots, but even those were showing a serious lack of grooming. I haven't spent long periods at it—it seems that slow and steady is better and most of the time is all that I have been able to manage. I have just been doing a dozen or so per day. Most days. Eventually I am finished to the extent that those I repotted back in November are needing attention again but then that's something we expect, isn't it? So I can't say all my potting is completely up to date but it is getting there.

Waiting for results

I still have very few flowers because the summer has been very hot and I decided to continue removing flowers and buds so as not to put the added stress on the plants. I will let them flower in the next few months. I will certainly have fewer plants than I have had for many, many years. I hope that it will work out that they are also better plants for the fact they will be more easily managed.



And yes, I have regretted some of the varieties I have tossed out. A few I have taken steps to get back. In most cases, though, I find if I get a few new ones from time to time I pretty quickly forget about the ones I don't have anymore. That's the theory anyway!

On a lighter note

Not absolutely every plant required complete renovation. Some just needed a bit of simple grooming.



The photographs at the left show a plant (top) whose leaves were really badly distorted out of shape because the flower buds were forming under the leaves instead of between them. It took but a few minutes to fix that, but some weeks for the distorted leaves to be persuaded to lie flat.

So that's pretty much my story.

A little bit at a time I have nibbled away at the problem. If I had tried to do it all in a short while it would have overwhelmed me, I'm sure.

Variegation

As one of the last parts of my African violet renovation described above, I have most recently been looking at my miniatures and semiminiatures. Specifically I have been looking at those with variegated foliage.

Many African violet growers are very fond of variegation in their plants and most would have at least a few in their collections. Like me these growers will have become aware that the amount of variegation in most of them is maximised by cool conditions and severely reduced by hot conditions. In some it may virtually disappear.

At the moment some of my plants have been behaving this way, but in others have decided to go their own way. We have had more of the most consistently hot weather than ever, according to official records. The maximum daily temperatures have been above average for six weeks consistently and the nights also hot. In my plant room the maximum has been well over 30 degrees Celsius for many weeks and at night hasn't really fallen below 25 degrees Celsius.

The only thing that has saved the plants has been the consistent and extremely high humidity. But I would expect much variegation to have disappeared, wouldn't you?

But here's some of what I found.

Remember this is just how the plants came off the shelf. They have yet to be repotted. There are outside leaves to remove because of being undersize, there are marked leaves and some plants are a bit distorted. Much of this can be fixed when repotting.

Let's look at them one by one.

1. 'Sunshine Lady'. This normally has creamy yellow variegation, but it has behaved just as you would expect it would in summer—it has gone all green.
2. 'Rob 's Chilly Willy' is normally very heavily variegated for me. At the moment this plant has little variegation—again exactly as it would be expected to behave in summer. It is looking rather open because it has the unfortunate habit of growing many suckers. I removed a lot just last week and when the plant is stripped back a little more and repotted I hope it will grow better.
3. 'Rob's Boogie Woogie' is the next photo. It often is plain green for me in the summer. In this case it has produced some really heavy variegation despite having been grown over summer. It was last potted in December. The variegation is yellowish although it is often tinged with pink.
4. 'Rob's Blue Socks' - beautifully variegated as you see. I have only had this for a few seasons. The plant I was given originally had all green leaves. It was summer, and in fact I did not realise at first that it



should be variegated. However even after repotting in autumn that plant remained green. After several cycles of repotting and through a couple of winters it remained stubbornly green. I then propagated from leaf and this plant has grown out variegated even in the summer. I'm not complaining.



5. 'Teen Sweetheart', one of my all time favourite semiminatures. No problem with its variegation despite the heat. It can do with the smaller outside leaves removed and being repotted.

6. 'Little Boy Blue'. I have known it lose variegation in the summer but at the moment it is doing fine.



7, 8, 9 and 10 are different faces of 'Rob's Scrumptious'. The first two of them were last potted in November, and are showing the signs of summer. The first one being all green, and the other showing seasonal green leaves in the centre.



The remaining two were potted in very early January. The first of these has surprisingly become very pale. It has very little variegation at all, and has grown only slowly for that reason. The second and last of the plants of 'Rob's Scrumptious' is the Goldilocks of them all—the variegation is just how I like it—pretty much uniform over the plant.



So, why have they grown in an untypical way? I would love to say I knew. I expect that it must be something to do with the potting mix, the watering, the fertiliser or the position on the shelves. Well that's a wide selection of possibles, isn't it? So let's look at the things that influence variegation.



1. Temperature. Variegation is more intense in cooler temperatures and less seen in hot temperatures, as already stated. In any growing area some positions are warmer and some cooler, whether it is a matter of choosing a window in a warmer or cooler room, or placing the plants on a lower shelf (cooler) or a higher shelf (warmer) on a light stand.

2. Fertiliser. High nitrogen fertilisers are said to promote the green leaves at the expense of the variegation. And yet, all my plants get the same fertiliser mixed in a 200 litre tank so the concentration is constant.

3. Potting mix. I make up my own potting mix from simple ingredients. I use the same recipe each time and always keep a note of any small changes I might make.

4. Watering. If plants are allowed to go dry for any length of time then unexpected consequences may occur.

5. The time of potting has a big influence. If the plant is repotted in the late autumn or winter the subsequent growth tends to be more



heavily variegated. The reverse is true for variegated plants repotted in autumn or winter. If the African violet is growing strongly it will more likely show seasonal difference in variegation.

Theoretically I prefer not to repot variegates or to propagate them during the cooler months because the subsequent growth is likely to be very pale and the plant will then be weaker and difficult to handle. However, I must admit that I sometimes repot anyway just because it is better to get it done than not.

There is one thing I have noticed during our recent spell of very hot, humid weather. Very small variegated plants I have potted out have not done well. Some of them have rotted entirely away. The heat and humidity combined was just too much for them. Now the weather is slightly cooler I must continue potting!

Friendship Plants

Most people will have heard of a Friendship Garden, or Memory Garden, where everywhere there are plants that are in honour of special people or events in one's life. My African violet and Gesneriad collection is like that.

So many dear people have given me plants that were their favourites, or that had some story attached to them, that working among my plants is like talking to all my friends.

This trailer is Rainbow's Weeping Clown. I don't rightly know how old the variety is but I think I have been growing it for around twenty years.



It was given to me by a member of our Society then. She was very fond of it and said that even when you propagate and get an all blue or all pink plant it is still a jolly good one. And she was right. Thanks, Jean!

I actually do think of her every time I am working with it.

This is my plant as it was some time back. It was part of my repotting programme and is now coming into bud again.

I can hardly wait for the flowers.

*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-January 2016. 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.*