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The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

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My favourite for today: Secret Love

This is by no means a new hybrid. I don't know when it first was introduced, but I am sure I have had it for over 20 years.

I liked it from the first. It has a good bloom count on each stem, a reasonably large flowers that last quite well. The leaves aren't perfect, but it is perfectly possible to grow a creditable show plant of it.

And if you don't want to exhibit it? Why it's just beautiful to enjoy as it grows and flowers. .

Just recently it had a period of not growing properly for me. My normal response if this happens is to discard the plant and grow another. But I have always been fond of this one so I persisted by taking a leaf and growing another generation several times until I once again had plants that perform well. Not everything is so amenable to this treatment, but I suppose I was lucky.

First Class says:

Double white and blue ruffled pansy. Medium green, plain, scalloped (foliage) I. Fredette.



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Take Pink for Instance . . .

It's a funny thing about colour. Most of us would agree that it is very important. But yet, unless we get down to colour charts and careful definitions, we continue to disagree on what colour is what.

This occurred to me recently in thinking about the colours of African violets. Until you get familiar with the immense world of different hybrids you have only the haziest idea of what is available. I have heard people say something like: "I've got the blue one and the mauve one. Do you have the pink one?" Do I have the pink one?? Yes, I do. A dozen and more times over.

But then which is the pink one? Even when you know that there are heaps of different pink ones and their colours range from light to dark there are still problems. Where does pink finish and red begin? Where is the division between pink and lilac? And so on, and so on.

I wouldn't want to give up the plethora of different hybrids we have, but wouldn't it be good if we could communicate a bit better about what they look like.

I remember, years ago I told another grower that a particular violet had watermelon coloured flowers. Bad mistake. He thought I meant green. I meant pink. He thought of the skin of the melon. I thought of the flesh.

So which is the pink violet:



Is it this one?



Or this?



Or this?

One of these perhaps?



Would the real pink violet please stand up! Well, I'm prepared to love them all, but I wish describing them was a little easier.

Potting mix quandary

I realise many growers do not make up their own potting mix, and don't want to. I have done it for many years. It is quite a good way to learn a bit about what the plants really do prefer and how to create the conditions that suit healthy root growth. The biggest problem is when I am forced to make a change in ingredients or when one of the ingredients themselves changes its character.

I wrote a general article on Potting Mixes in March 2014 and in the July 2014 issue I wrote about some of my adventures in trying various types of mix for African violets and about substitutes for the use of peat moss.

Now it is time to follow through on what I said then. I have almost run out of peat moss and will need to make up new mix pretty soon.

What I said 2 years ago was:

***What would I use**, if I have to substitute something else for the peat moss in my mix? On previous experience I would definitely choose garden compost. Failing that coir would be my choice. I haven't heard terribly good reports of diatomite for growing African violets but perhaps that should be my next trial. Whichever way I choose, I do know that eventually I am unlikely to be using sphagnum peat moss.*

Unfortunately using garden compost or leaf mould is not an option now because I have nowhere for it to mature or to be stored. So, there is no alternative; I will have to give coir another try. Quite a few others are using it now so I shouldn't be concerned – and yet . . .

It's always a bit like stepping into the unknown to buy some different ingredients and make up a potting mix for your plants. Unexpected things can happen. But every time I try something different I learn a little something new.

I am not discouraging anyone from experimentation, although I don't believe that anyone who isn't a devotee of mud pies would necessarily want to do all the experimenting I have done. After all, for me it has taken over 30 years.

My conclusion after all this time is that potting mix has to be a balance of moisture retaining materials and granular material to let in air. What really matters is the texture of the mix. Not the individual things you put in it. As I have said before air and water are the most important ingredients and so long as you allow for those, the rest follows after.

Of course there are two other important factors.

The first of these is having the correct pH (acidity/alkalinity balance) in the mix so that the various fertilisers are available to the roots. I prefer a pH between 6.3 & 6.8. Opinions differ on the exact "best" pH but it seems to be agreed that slightly below neutral (7.0) is good. Mixes are often too acid because peat moss is an acid material. Correct the acidity by adding some

form of lime, usually dolomite.

The second additional factor is freedom from all sorts of pathogens, micro-organisms and foreign growths. If in doubt about the cleanliness of any ingredient pasteurise by bringing to 80° C for around half an hour. So that's it. Potting mix ought to be simple.

So, anyway, tomorrow I'm off to purchase coir to make up more potting mix. I'll be using it cautiously to start with and won't really know what I'm doing for a while. It can sometimes take a good while for the effects of a mix to make themselves apparent. But I am certain I will let you know at a later date just how it works out.

Don't let me stop you from experimenting with your potting mix. After all I have always experimented freely as you can see. But some words of warning.

- Only experiment on a few plants at a time but be sure it is enough to actually make a judgement.
- With any potting mix, allow at least three months before you declare your mix to be good.
- Be prepared to lose some plants along the way so don't experiment on anything irreplaceable.
- Keep careful and complete records for future reference.

Summer Violets, Winter Violets

Some violet flowers look best in warm weather and then there are those that look best in cooler conditions. Whichever way it is, it makes for interest.

Here are some changes you might see in the flowers depending on season.

In cooler conditions:

- Colours are often richer.
- Fantasy markings are more pronounced.
- In coloured blooms with white edges (Geneva type blooms) those edges will often become most pronounced and crisp.
- In some bicoloured flowers, thumbprints especially, colours may fade out to the white in lower temperatures. Normally the colours in these flowers will come back in more moderate temperatures.
- Semidoubles and doubles will tend to show a little more "doubling".

In warmer conditions the converse is often true:

- Colours of the flowers are a little paler.
- All sorts of fantasy markings may be less distinct.

- Geneva flowers with fine white edges may virtually lose the edges.
- Thumbprint violets and some other bicoloured flowers may become almost solid in colour.
- Semidoubles will often look single and doubles not so full.

Most of us will not have conditions so extreme that all our African violets go all the way from one end of the spectrum to the other. If your conditions are generally warm some of your plants at least, may never show the effects of cool temperatures. And similarly if you live in a cool climate and employ minimal heating your African violets may never show the signs of high temperatures.

Some of the plants tend to show more sensitivity to heat than to cold, and, finally, you will occasionally find that the plants do just the opposite of what I have said.

Fun, isn't it!

Just to define some terms given above:

Geneva:

A Geneva flower is one where there is a white edge around each coloured petal. They are so named after 'Miss Geneva' probably the first hybrid to show this characteristic.



Thumbprint:

Thumbprint flowers are those where there is a blotch or marking of colour on each, or some of the petals. This one, also featured on page 2, is a good example.



Fantasy:

Fantasy violets have spots or streaks of a second colour on a base colour.



Chimera:

These violets have radiating bands of colour along each petal. They have two different kinds of cell and this means they cannot be propagated by leaf (they will not come "true") but only by side-shoot or flower stem.



Old Friends

This photograph is Taffeta Petticoats.

Its description is : *Semidouble pink star/white edge medium green, plain, ovate (leaves). Standard. Sorano. 1995.*

I think I have probably been growing it ever since it was a brand new violet. Sadly it doesn't seem to be doing too well at the moment. This photo was taken some years ago and I just wish the flowers would look like this again. Instead, they tend to be paler, less frilly and the white edge seems to be absent much of the time, not just during hot weather.



Usually if a particular violet will no longer grow well for me or if it no longer pleases me, I simply discard it. There always new ones coming along that I want to grow so the extra space is always welcome. In the case of Taffeta Petticoats I am not at all keen to get rid of it. It is really rather special to me. So I am still trying to persuade it to grow properly.

As well as growing some newer violets, or at least some violets that are new to me, I have recently re-acquired some old friends. Some of them I haven't grown for many years, so it is nice to see their faces once more. My violet collection is constantly changing.

Ness' Viking Maiden—This is a very good white and even if I only grow it for a little while it will be good to see it again.

Tiger—A large growing, bold, dark blue on variegated foliage. I grew it for a good long time back in the 1980s and 90s when it was very popular. I only got it again almost by mistake—but I'll grow it for a little while anyway and think about violets way back then,.

Fisherman's Paradise—Smallish lavender flowers on the most lovely variegated foliage.

Integrity—Light pink flowers with a dark edge. Grows really well.

Anastasia—A large grower with two-tone blue flowers.

Rainbow's Quiet Riot—This is an indispensable show plant with wonderful even growing dark leaves. The flowers are blue/purple with white fantasy markings. I didn't so much get rid of it before. It really got rid of me. It just stopped growing well and there was nothing I could do. Now I have a leaf from a good source so I am really looking forward to seeing the flowers again.

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