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The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

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And here we are in a new year, and so I hope it will be a very happy and successful one for us all.

As far as my African violets are concerned, it is remarkably like the old year! There are still plants that reproach me whenever I go near because they are needing repotting—be patient my dears, I will get to you soon!

At least the watering is up to date and that is a good thing considering the hot weather we have been having.

But what to do about all the repotting that is awaiting me? Well, this really hot time is not the right time to do any serious repotting. The plants are under enough stress as it is. So I am biding my time and just preparing them a bit for repotting in a couple of months time.

What I am doing now is this. I am working through shelf by shelf, considering each plant as I go. I am doing a good grooming, taking off all old and damaged leaves that will have to go when I do repot. Naturally any suckers I see will have to go. I have taken off most of the flowers as the plants are rather stressed with heat anyway. I top up the potting mix if that is enough to make the plant ready to start growing again. I check each plant for pests and disease. I have found none so far.

I then leach each plant thoroughly and set back on its wick system. Want to know more about leaching—next time!

Species African violets—first for simplicity

This, on the right, is a flower of Saintpaulia ionantha ssp. rupicola (formerly known just as Saintpaulia rupicola).



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Heat Wave

Really hot weather is hard to handle for people and plants alike. Although I know that many who read this may be in the middle of winter, but right here, right now it is hot. We are having a heat wave. And I am feeling tired, limp and lack-lustre. And you know what? So are my African violets. It is really correct when people say that African violets like (and dislike) conditions the same way we do.

How does the heat affect African violets?

1. Moisture evaporates away rapidly allowing the plant to dry out
2. Plant may wilt even though the root area is moist as the plant is losing moisture even more quickly than the roots can take it up. This is particularly noticeable where the humidity is low
3. Growth becomes “soft” in high humidity, high heat conditions. That is, it will be very sensitive to cooler, low humidity conditions.
4. Centres of the plant may become tight, with leaves smaller and with shorter petioles than usual.
5. Some leaves may become rangy, with longer than normal petioles.
6. Some of the leaves may tend to grow upwards spoiling the flat symmetry of the plant
7. Variegated leaves will show more green and in some cases the variegation may entirely disappear
8. Bicolour African violets may lose the bicolour effect in their flowers and become temporarily solid
9. Markings can become less defined in fantasy type African violets
10. In some chimeras the colours may “bleed” one into the other so the pinwheel effect is not as clear.
11. Flowers are smaller, although if other needs are met they may be very plentiful
12. Some miniatures and semiminiatures and many trailers can have such small, deformed and underdeveloped flowers that you may think some disease is present.



It's Summer . . . and these plants are showing it.

Left: Cirelda—tiny flowers that are pale and distorted.

Right: Icy Sunset—leaves removed to show that the inner leaves are distorted and curled.



In short the ways your plants may react to high temperatures are many and varied. Each plant can behave differently, and there are no doubt some you will find are more suited to your growing conditions.

Of course the ideal would be to keep the temperatures down. Not everyone wants to run an air conditioner in their plant growing area though. And even if you didn't mind the expense, it isn't particularly friendly to the environment to do so.

So, short of moving yourself and your plants to a cooler climate in the summer what can you do to help your African violets to survive in a heat wave?

1. Eliminate sources of additional heat. This means that with artificial lights you might choose to turn the lights off during the hottest part of the day, remembering to give the plants adequate light when the heat wave is over. If growing by natural light perhaps you could move the plants away from the windows when the outside air is at its hottest. Giving the plants less light is obviously not good, and they may begin to suffer the effects, but you may decide that is preferable to adding to the heat stress.
2. Another option is to run the lights at night rather than during the heat of the day. While there is a body of opinion that this will be unsatisfactory, I have been doing it happily for 25 years or more and so have many other growers of my acquaintance.
3. If using artificial lighting, think about using the newer LED light tubes. I have not tried these but there are a good many growers now using them quite satisfactorily. The advantage is that they do not create the heat that the fluorescent tubes do. I have decided to use up the fluorescent tubes I have on hand before making any changes.

So, how hot is too hot?

Well, opinions vary as to that.

Most of what you will find if you research this question is that they will do best if they are grown in day time temperatures that are as close to 20-21 degrees C (approx. 70 degrees F.) as possible. Night time temperatures are optimum if around 5 degrees C. lower.

If you can keep the temperatures at 24 to 18 degrees C. day time /night time (75 to 65 degrees F) your plants will likely thrive. This would be optimal. However, such temperatures are really an impossible dream for many growers in a warm climate.

Fortunately African violets are quite adaptable and will live through less than perfect temperatures. You may just have to accept the fact that they will suffer some ill effects and wait for conditions to improve.

One grower I have spoken to says that in her very hot climate the violets really just "exist" during the summer, but grow well in winter.

So what is the maximum temperature that the plants may be subjected to before action is taken? Once again, that varies, in particular according to how much damage you will accept.

For myself, I tend to turn the lights of my plant stands off when the temperature in the violet room rises above around 31-32 degrees C. (around 88 to 90 F.)

It's a compromise. I will put up with the damage from the heat to a certain extent because I don't want the problems from lack of light to get too extreme.



Varying amounts of heat problems:

Leaves badly affected and plant will need repotting; Leaves growing upwards because of lack of light; few effects.

4. Cut down on additional external ventilation. Turn off exhaust fans and keep windows and doors closed. Circulating fans may be used for internal ventilation.
5. Plants that are particularly sensitive to the heat can be moved to the coolest spots in your growing area
6. Keep watering up to date
7. Try to keep the plants free of pests and disease approaching the summer. Remember that all the bugs tend to breed more rapidly during hot periods. It pays to be prepared. It is not wise to spray pesticides when temperatures are very high, so when it is necessary, do any spraying in the cool of the early morning.
8. High temperatures can be more damaging on your African violets in low humidity.
9. Lack of humidity can be a concern in a heat wave. Some people like to mist the plants with lukewarm water but it is doubtful that has any effect other than for a few moments, but there is no reason not to do it. Use a capillary matting watering system if you have ongoing low humidity problems. With this system evaporation from the matting should gently boost the humidity around the plants. The same can be said for using wick watering on open trays.
10. If you have an option, grow in a cooler area of your home.

So – what do **you** need when you are really hot and a little dehydrated? A good drink and to sit in a position where you can get some cool air? Probably. Just remember that’s what your African violets would like too!

Growing Tip—a problem in propagation

This is timely for northern hemisphere growers, who are in deep winter. If you are living in Australia, suffering, I think, another record hot summer, think back to winter. Did you have leaves planted for propagation that produced very white or yellow babies? Wonder what the problem is?

Here is a really good explanation. <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Are-These-Baby-Violets-in-Trouble-.html?soid=1118749798025&aid=nBD5WtBbfVg>

That is one of the **African Violet Society of America’s “Growing Tips”**. If you find it helpful, why not sign up on their website to receive them regularly?

Handy mobile workbench/tool caddy.

Ten years or more ago I purchased two little trolleys from a shop that sells very cheap imported goods. They looked as though they would be good for use in my violet room. They were not as high as a table top and each had four quite large plastic drawers and were on casters. Seemed good. The frames were metal, and so were the flat top surfaces. Because they were such inexpensive items the quality was not high and the metal soon rusted in the warm humid confines of the violet room and so they were parked in an out of the way spot and fell into disuse.

Recently my husband decided he could revitalise the whole system by building new frames. The casters were good quality and the drawers were a satisfactory size and still in good condition. While rebuilding we did a complete redesign and turned it into just one high quality piece.

Now I have a wonderful item whose height is ideal for me to stand and work at and the drawers hold a very useful array of tools and other items. Even better the frame is high quality aluminium so the whole thing is very sturdy while being easy enough to move around the room because of the casters. The top has a piece of vinyl glued to it to provide an easily wiped work surface.

In rebuilding into only one unit, only six of the drawers were used. The two left over will eventually come in for something. I know it!

In my six drawers I have a variety of items that might be needed as I groom plants. The top drawer holds a small container of potting mix. The second drawer has a selection of tools – brushes, scissors, tweezers and so on. The remaining drawers have things that are used slightly less often such as plant labels, small leaf supports, domes for isolating an individual plant, and so on.

So a formerly unused purchase has turned into one of the most useful things in my growing area.

And probably the best thing of all is that the large open top surface is ideal to place a tray of plants prior to placing them on the shelves.

No more chance of me knocking over plants that have been placed in a precarious and unsafe spot!



African Violet Instability—in all its glory

This is all about three African violet hybrids that have each shown the tendency to change their nature. Now of course many growers demand that the violets they grow turn out the same every time they flower and indeed every time they are propagated. And that's an argument, of course. Especially for show growers. But for me—well I like a nice surprise!

The three violets I am writing of were released in 1988 by hybridiser Dorothy Rutherford of Brisbane, Queensland. I think it is fairly likely that they were all siblings. Not only are there family likenesses but their behaviour is similar. I acquired all of them at the time and enjoyed growing them.

The first of these is 'Blue Velvet'. It is described as "Navy blue-purple frilled large pansy. Plain foliage. **Standard**".

This description indicates a pretty standard ordinary dark blue-purple. But the flower really was very large. And what's more it eventually produced a mutation I rather liked. (Picture 1.) I no longer have it and I really don't remember what happened to it.

The second hybrid was 'Heather Belle'. It's description is "Semidouble white pansy / dark purple edge. Medium green foliage. **Standard**"

It was quite variable in the way it flowered. (Pictures 2 & 3) and eventually it produced a sport for me that was very chimera-like. (Picture 4). I grew this and exhibited it for many years, but I don't know what eventually happened to it either. But meanwhile another grower, Marina Stukacz, found a sport of it that is a true chimera and this is now grown by many others.

It's name is "Enigma" and its description is "Single chimera dark purple pansy / white stripe. Medium green, quilted foliage. Sport of "Heather Belle". **Standard**"

Picture 5 shows a splendid plant of it grown by Jenny & Pete White and exhibited successfully in the Central Coast African Violet Show some years ago. Picture 6 shows that even the back of the flower is exquisite.

The third hybrid that is related to these is 'Topliner'. It is described "White frilled pansy / wide lavender edge. Medium green foliage. **Standard**"

Picture 7 shows 'Topliner' as I grew it until 6 or 7 years ago. More recently, in the collection of Dennis Halton, it has produced an interesting chimera, now called 'Den's Isabella'. It is a little variable in its flowering. See Pictures 8 & 9.



Extension of Super Special Offer!

This special offer was originally going to finish on 31 December, 2016. Because of demand and requests, it has been extended.

The basic price of each book is reduced from \$28.50 (AU) to **\$21.00 (AU)**

The basic price of each CD is reduced from \$9.00 (AU) to **\$8.00 (AU)**

Remember that normally two books can be sent for the same postage as one. Buy a copy for a friend and make a saving. Special prices for bulk purchase.

This special offer will run until 1 March, 2017.

Pricing detail can be seen on the website "orders" page.

'Den's Isabella' is described as "Single chimera blue and white rayed stickite pansy. Dark green quilted, heart-shaped foliage. Sport of "Topliner" **Standard.**"

To me an interesting thing about this plant occurred when I propagated a number of flower stems. We know that with chimeras even flower stem propagation isn't guaranteed to produce 100% plantlets just like the mother. In this case, I got mostly 'Den's Isabella' but a small number that were 'Topliner'. That was fine by me as I hadn't grown 'Topliner' for some years and was quite happy to have it in my collection again. Eventually the 'Topliner' plant I kept needed to be potted down and started again from a small crown. When I did this and then let it come into flower again—it became 'Den's Isabella'.

So now I am wondering—what new variations will we see. I can hardly wait.

Note: *The colouring of the flowers is probably more alike than is shown here. Please understand that the photographs have been taken over around a 25 year time span and their quality is variable.*

But I am sure you will see that there is a great family resemblance between these. In fact, Picture 1 ('Blue Velvet Sport') looks pretty much like the description for 'Heather Belle' to me.



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