

March 2017

# The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

A free download from [www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net](http://www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net)

The terribly hot weather has let up at last and I have approached some repotting finally. I have also surveyed my plants and find that between them all they are suffering just about all the heat effects that you can think of.

There are a few exceptions. One is Anastasia. This lovely blue is another oldie that I had years ago and have acquired again in recent years. Almost without intention, I must say.

I was given a leaf and thought I would just grow it for a few cycles and then get rid of it again. But now I think I will change my mind!

Its flowers seem to be just as they should be and the leaves are not curling up, growing long petioles nor showing any other problem they could have. It could be that the small cream coloured patch on the leaf closest to the camera in my photo is caused by heat, but that would be all. The brownish patches on the leaves are caused by poor photography. But what a tough little darling!

Well—a big darling actually. I think the main reason I stopped growing it before was that it grows very big.

The description goes: *“Semi-double two-tone blue pansy. Medium green plain leaves. S. Sorano, 1993.”*



You are invited to download this Newsletter and to enjoy it in any way you wish, of course with full attribution to source. Should you want to comment, ask a question or contribute, please email me at [coulson.ruthm@gmail.com](mailto:coulson.ruthm@gmail.com)

## Magic Fertilisers

I really thought that a lot of the myths relating to growing African violets had disappeared. But that is not so.

Only recently two different people have been asking me about using tea or perhaps coffee or coffee grounds on their African violets to get plants that do extra well. It is an old suggestion. There are also those who believe in eggshells, fruit juice, milk, shredded banana peels – you name it, someone thinks it would be a good idea – and swears their plants do better than ever before they started using whatever material it is that they favour.

There are a couple of reasons that people are interested in these possibilities. First is the desire to trying to find a fertiliser that is natural and not factory made. And secondly, there is the idea of not wasting anything, which is laudable in itself.

I am not sure if these ideas first became common before it was possible to buy specific African violet fertilisers, or just because many of these materials have been suggested for years for other plants in the garden. Dig in crushed eggshells around roses, for instance, or push banana skins in behind staghorn and elkhorn ferns. I am not experienced in growing either of these types of plants so I can't be sure, but I believe that, as with African violets, nothing, nothing at all, as effective as a properly formulated fertiliser with known ingredients. It is especially true if you are trying to grow really special African violets to win shows or just to amaze friends and family. And, to enjoy for yourself, of course.

What's the problem with these other materials? The thing is, each one may have some suitable elements in it, but it is impossible to know how much of that element you are adding. And, of course, the main thing to go for is "balance". This is very important in a fertiliser. It is possible that some of them may well change the pH (acidity-alkalinity balance) of your potting mix if used them excessively. African violets need an slightly acid soil. A pH of 7 is neutral. African violets do best at around 6.5 to 6.8. Beware of coffee and particularly tea as they are quite acidic. And egg shells, although they contain calcium, are going to increase the pH, although only slightly. This effects on the pH could be ameliorated, though, by leaching regularly.

Success would depend on the amount used and how you could keep a check on the way the plants are growing from week to week. I'm not sure it is worth it!

BUT – don't let me stop you from experimenting. If you have actually found any of these "alternative fertilisers" really are good, then please let me know.

*Suitable fertilisers normally have main ingredients of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium.*

*Together these elements promote leaf and root growth and flowering. There are usually some trace elements present too. These are other items which are also required in very tiny quantities.*

*For growing African violets you need a fertiliser that is formulated for flowering plants. If you are going to use wick watering or capillary matting you will need one that is completely water soluble.*

*There are heaps of fertilisers that are specifically formulated for African violets.*

## Leaching

*As mentioned in my last issue*

There is always something to do around an African violet collection. Now that our temperatures have moderated somewhat I can really get to work on the repotting I mentioned last issue. Even those that don't need repotting do need some attention. Once again I fear I have been rather a poor grower over this summer. Really hot weather and I just don't agree these days, so the plant room has been rather a no-go zone for me. But now it's different.

I have been getting into the real potting at this time. Just a little each day soon brings things under control. I have also gone through the whole lot of my African violets and leached them. This does revive them wonderfully and seems to virtually give them a new start. I know I wrote about leaching before but I think it is super-important in hot weather if you water your African violets from below—whatever the method you use to do that.

Some of the best growers I have known have leached their plants regularly as a matter of course.

**So, what is leaching?** It involves washing the potting mix through with clean slightly warm water, removing any build up of fertiliser or other undesirable salts. Enough water should be used to run freely from the drain holes of the pot. I really mean "runs freely". Don't be stingy with the water. If you are deeply into conserving water you can tip this leach water onto the lawn. It won't do any harm.

Dale Martens, legendary US grower and hybridiser of all kinds of gesneriads, recommends two cups of water to leach a fairly small pot of *Streptocarpus*. Let that be a guide, but I am not sure that you would need to use quite that much for an African violet.

**Why is it necessary?** Watering from below, in my case using the wick-watering method, means that all the movement of the water is upwards. The moisture is partly taken up by the plant but partly evaporated from the surface of the potting mix. When this moisture is evaporated away it leaves behind the fertiliser and sometimes some of the soluble portions of the mix that were carried with it. This builds up in the top of the potting mix.

You may also see an unsightly brownish crust around the top of the pot itself. This is the same material that you often find around the outside of the drain holes in the bottom and sides of the pot. It can easily burn the leaves and stems of an African violet. Sometimes you can see the same material on the small centre leaves, especially in a young plant.

Regular leaching can help eliminate these problems.

**How often should one leach?** That's actually rather a difficult question to answer. There is no set time period that should be used. For me, it is when I can manage it. Probably every couple of months. Naturally I work progressively through the plants. I wouldn't consider trying to do them all at once. I can't really say just how long it takes me to get through everything.

**Does the plant then go back to its regular fertilising and watering regime?** Yes indeed it does. As soon as the excess of the water has drained away, it can be returned to its waterwell, tray, saucer, capillary matting etc. It will be refreshed and revived!

## Further to the article about the wonderful instability of African

As far as mutations (sports) are concerned in African violets, we should be grateful that the plants do have this tendency. That is where some of our great range of different types has originated.

The first white, the first red, the first pink, the first double—all these things and many others too, occurred as a result of mutations. So we mustn't be too extreme in our desire for stability.

This has come to mind as a result of an interesting plant of 'Taffeta Petticoats' that has come my way. Sometime last year I said in this newsletter that although it was a plant I really liked because of its beautiful flowers, I was having difficulty in growing it these days. See the photograph at the top of this page for how the flowers should look. A member of one of the societies to which I belong brought along a young plant for me to a meeting. This was a much appreciated gift. I potted it up and grew it on.



Because of the extreme heat in January and February I removed all flowers. More recently I decided to let a few buds develop and also to repot the plant as it was only in a smallish pot. Before I even repotted the buds had opened and gave me quite a surprise! See the second photograph.

As you see—there is no white edge on reddish pink as expected. Instead, pink, white and even dark red (where did that come from?) are mixed in together in all sorts of ways that vary greatly from flower to flower. In fact no two flowers are alike.

There was a time when I would have discarded this straight away but now I just want to see what it will do next! What is not apparent in the photograph is that there are dark markings on the leaves here and there that reveal patches of red lining on the under surface. This is called birthmarking, and often indicates some change or instability in the plant. And it really does seem to be the case. If it ever settles to being one type of flower that will be interesting in itself. Another possibility is to plant a leaf and see what colour



### When is a sport not a sport?

I know, I know—I have said it before, but the fact is still there. When a plant is different to the actual description of the hybrid there can be several reasons. It isn't always a sport.

These reasons are:

- The plant you have is wrongly named
- The season or growing conditions are temporarily altering the way the plant performs.
- Poor health in the plant may cause some changes in both flower and leaf.
- There is a genetic change—this is a sport.

flowers the plantlets produce. Probably just a lot of variability in each one—or so I think. But I might be wrong.

In the last six months I have had quite a lot of my violets produce sports. Here are some photos as examples:



*Far left is Candyman—a beautiful plant and the other two photographs are of the sports that occurred. The leaves of the original plant are darkish, but with the lighter coloured flowers came lighter leaves as well. Leaf shape and plant behaviour was the same.*



*Here is Oracle and the sport from it. The lovely rich red colour is missing from the sport and the leaves are a lighter colour too.*

*Note though, that not all sports are desirable. All three of these have been discarded. Yes, they look pretty in the photos, but all three of them had the bad habit of producing brown looking petaloids in the centre leaves. The sport of Oracle was particularly bad. But it is always worth trying out the sport to see if you have something wonderful!*

## More about species African violets

If you are interested in learning more about Saintpaulia species, here is a very good information source.

The Gesneriad Society holds Webinars on various topics of interest to all growers. The one that is probably of the most interest to those who only grow African violets is the one called “Growing the Saintpaulia Species” by Dr. Jeff Smith.

The live webinar event was held some months ago, but it is still possible to view the presentation on your computer.

There is a small charge, but it is just that—small. It can be viewed online until 31 March 2017 but for some months after that should be available as a downloadable file.

There is also a webinar entitled “Growing and Showing African Violets” by Sandra Skalski. Or you may even be interested in some of the other webinars on the various other Gesneriad topics.

So, go ahead, treat yourself: <https://shop.gesneriadsociety.org/collections/webinars>

Remember, we owe it to the species to grow them.

*You need not be a member of the Gesneriad Society to download these webinars.*



## Lack of Growth in a Terrarium

Some time ago I wrote about the benefits to be gained by covering or enclosing a plant that was struggling, or newly potted, to give it a bit of a boost. That little bit of extra humidity just makes all the difference.

But perhaps I wasn't specific enough about how long this should be continued. The fact is it shouldn't be continued very long at all. A week, two weeks perhaps is all that is needed. Of course in very humid weather this probably does not apply. But if conditions are dry or cool it is most beneficial.

The reasons that you might want to enclose an African violet for a short while are many:

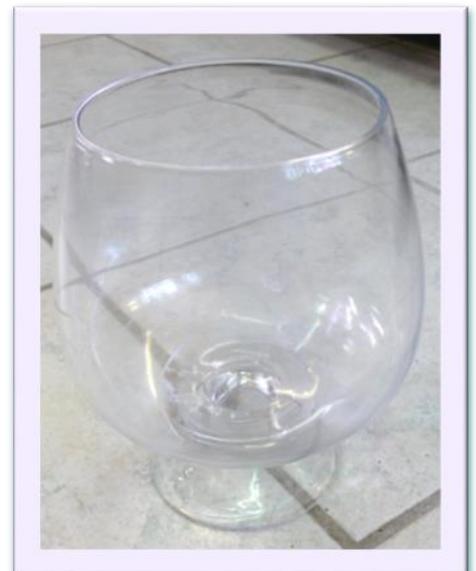
1. If the plant has been accidentally allowed to dry out and wilted. After careful watering, enclosure for a short while will help it to rehydrate.
2. If you are repotting and there are very few or no roots left, the plant it will prevent it wilting so it can go ahead and produce roots and grow again.
3. If, for reasons that you cannot be sure of, the plant is simply not thriving, putting it into terrarium-like conditions for a short while might be all the help it needs.
4. This is also a pretty good way of isolating a plant that may be carrying some disease or infestation.
5. Heavily variegated young plants or leaves under propagation will benefit from the extra protection of a terrarium in cold conditions.

There are bound to be other reasons than the ones I have listed, but except for the case of no.4 above, it is important not to leave the plant too long.

If kept in high humidity for an extended period the plant becomes "soft" and inclined to suffer when removed. But there is another reason that I had probably not mentioned before and that is that in conditions of high humidity the plant does not dry out, so it does not draw up very much moisture. And that's well and good, but it may mean that it doesn't get any fertiliser either.

I had someone contact me to say that she had enclosed her miniature violet when she repotted it—and it really had just stopped growing. Further discussion showed that she had actually had the plant on wick watering but as it was covered, I doubt whether it was drawing much of the water and fertiliser.

And so—no growth! Something that must be remembered. Plants normally do much better long-term in open air. Open topped terrariums like the one pictured can be ideal.



*Here is something to see:*

If you are in the Sydney, Newcastle or NSW mid-north coast (or if you are likely to be) on the weekend of 6 & 7 May 2017, take the opportunity to see the

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

At the Cardiff Senior Citizens Centre, 52 Harrison St Cardiff (Corner of Myall Road)

Saturday 6 May—1pm to 4 pm

Sunday 7 May—10am to 3pm

Beautiful plants and photographs on display

Plants and growing supplies available to purchase

*(Hint: good opportunity to pick up a Mothers' Day gift!)*

*I hope to see you there!*

## **Variegation Disappeared!**

Someone was very worried because her beautiful variegated African violet had gone all green.

And then she was relieved to be told that this was a perfectly natural effect of the extreme hot weather we had been having. But—should she throw it away and get another one?

No—not at all.

Soon enough temperatures will be cool and the new leaves growing out in the centre of the plant will begin to show variegation once again. If not, repot when it is more mild and that will start a growth spurt that will bring the variegation back.

The plant here is Rob's Slap Happy. It is one of my favourites. I am glad to say that it doesn't seem to have minded the heat at all, as far as flowers are concerned. But there is no variegation at the moment. There will be, though.



*I hope you enjoy this e-newsletter. It is available every second month, unless otherwise notified. You are welcome to distribute it to others if you wish. Articles reused must be acknowledged to source. If you would like email notification of when that will be ready for download, please email me at [coulson.ruthm@gmail.com](mailto:coulson.ruthm@gmail.com). Otherwise just keep checking back to the website: [www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net](http://www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net). Remember, too, all this information **and more** is available in the book 'African Violets for Everyone' - available from the website.*