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The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

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Once again life has been getting in the way of my African violet hobby (addiction?). But the plants have not minded at all. With the cooler weather of winter and as I have been able to at least keep the watering reasonably up to date, they are flowering very well.

I knew a grower once who had so many plants on her shelf that they were overlapping so that it must have been a big job to get a plant off the shelf for any reason. But the way it looked! Well—just beautiful. A tapestry of African violet colour. I don't grow my plants like that because it poses too many problems. But the tapestry effect is just as pronounced with a mass of flowers, isn't it? I picked these off for the photograph and a week later I am still enjoying them in a floating arrangement.



Does your African violet have too many heads?



Would you rather your African violets resembled the photograph on the left with one crown, or the photograph on the right with many crowns?

Easy decision? Here's how to make it happen.



Most satisfactory African violets have only one crown with all the leaves and flowers radiating out from that centre. So let us consider what has happened to make the plant in Photo 2 look the way it does.

The reason is that they began to produce small side shoots or suckers around the base and in the leaf axils. To keep the plant growing properly, these should have been removed as soon as they were seen. This would have ensured that it remained single crowned and chances are it would have had plenty of flowers at this stage. Yes, my fault! I should have paid more attention and grown it better. Do note that if you let an African violet grow many crowns it will normally not flower as well.

Another reason that we get multi-headed monsters instead of neat growing African violets is if something has happened to damage the centre. This might be caused by mites (a common pest), over fertilising or other mechanical damage. Try to protect the centre of the plant at all times.

Never confuse a multi-crowned rosette type African violet with a trailing African violet. Trailing African violets have many stems which form the plant into a ball-shape of leaves and plenty of flowers. Whether your plant is meant to be single crowned or a trailer is a different subject, but is laid down by the hybridiser in the original description.

You may think that allowing your normally rosette African violet to produce many heads will make a trailer-like plant. That is not the case usually. In most cases they become distorted like the plant in Photo 2, and refuse to produce a lot of flower. But try it if you like – you might have something interesting. Of course a plant that is not grown according to its official description cannot be exhibited, but then you might not be wanting to exhibit.



This is 'Cirelda', probably one of the best ever pink trailing African violets. Consider the difference between it and the multi-crowned "rosette" plant in Photo 2.

All is not lost if like me you have let the plant go its own way for too long. African violets are actually very forgiving and fairly tough and hardy, so you should not be too afraid of dividing up a multi-headed plant. Done carefully you will not only have extra plants but they will finally have a good circular shape and plentiful flowers.

Consider the season before dealing with a plant that needs surgery. It is better not to do major repotting in mid-winter unless you have truly warm conditions in which to grow your plants. That means warm at night as well as during the day. Spring is the ideal time as there is all the warmth of summer ahead for the plants to regrow, but any time that it is warm is satisfactory.

So here's how to go about it:

- Photo 4 shows a plant that needs to be divided. It is growing in a most unruly fashion. The few flowers and buds have already been removed. Once the crowns are planted separately it should not be too long before lots more flowers are produced.
- Make sure you have on hand some high quality African violet potting mix and sufficient small pots for your plants. You may decide to keep all the different crowns coming from the pot, or you may decide to just keep the best one or two so provide accordingly. (Photo 5)
- Have courage and tip out the pot that you are going to deal with. Shake as much of the potting mix as possible away from the roots. An implement can be used to "comb" more mix away from the roots. (Photo 6)
- Then gently divide the plants. It won't matter if you break a few leaves as this will be a good time to remove all the outside leaves from the various crowns, so that new growth from the centre can take over. Just take care not to damage the centres as that is where all the new growth will come. (Photo 7). This plant had four crowns. Three is plenty for me to pot up. The small one on the bottom right of the photograph is to be discarded. It has no roots and the leaves are badly distorted. It would grow, but it is the least preferred.
- Roots may also be damaged during division; in fact that is almost inevitable and doesn't matter too much.
- Photo 8 shows some of the leaves that have been removed during the dividing process. Many of them are old and damaged but there are some that would propagate quite well if planted. I am not going to pot them, however. As I just said, three plants of the variety is plenty for me.
- Photo 9 shows the three chosen crowns with outside leaves removed and roots trimmed appropriately. There should be a balance between the roots and the leaves of each crown.



Where there are fewer roots I like to remove more leaves and use a smaller pot.

- For each crown you should select a pot that is only slightly larger than the amount of roots on the plant. In particular, for an un-rooted crown of a standard African violet I normally use a pot no larger than 70mm across.
- Remember that African violets thrive best in shallow pots, so trim off excess roots so that the plant will end up with the bottom leaves level with or just above the surface of the potting mix. Should it be that some crowns have no roots left at all when you have trimmed that's perfectly satisfactory since the crown alone can be planted and will grow new roots in the fresh potting mix. You may, however, choose those with roots already formed as I did.
- In Photo 10 the smallest of the crowns has been potted into a 50 mm. or 2 inch pot. The level of the mix around the plant may look a little high, but experience has shown me that this very light mix does settle a little once it is moistened.



- After potting up as many of the crowns as you want to grow, water them by placing in a shallow dish or saucer of luke-warm water until the whole of the mix has become dampened (Photo 11). Once watered they need a final brush up to remove crumbs of potting mix from the leaves and leaf stems, and the pots should be wiped over so they are beautifully clean. The little plants are now ready to start growing.
- Once moistened, I like to keep newly potted plants on a dry tray for about a week before placing on my normal watering system. I rewet them at that stage. This is not necessarily essential as many growers immediately place on a wick watering or capillary matting system. When some new growth is seen or when you are sure that roots have formed, start applying an appropriate weak fertiliser. Roots form quickly in warm conditions.
- Keep the new little plants moist, fertilise lightly, keep warm and keep in a good light. Attention to these matters will facilitate rooting and good growth. You will be rewarded with well-formed plants that should, with good care, flower abundantly.

This variegated plant had been sitting on the shelf waiting for attention for some months. I first decided to replot it back in February. The weather was very hot then. I knew that if I repotted I would have plants that really were just plain green because the high temperatures would cause the variegation to virtually disappear. I put a label on it saying "Replot in a cooler time". Well I meant it to happen in May, but it didn't. Now I have done the job in the middle of winter. It is possible that growth will be very white because of low temperatures now. I will keep the little plants in an enclosed terrarium-like environment to try to overcome this.

Note: This article will eventually be part of website information.

Winter time can be the best time

Back in January, when discussing the problems caused by very hot temperatures for growing African violets, I said:

“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”

I pointed out that such temperatures are an impossible dream in a warm climate in the summer. But now it is winter! With a little heating these temperatures are quite possible. In my plant room, I use no heating at all, but I run the lighting at night and use that to give some warmth. I have temporarily turned off my exhaust fans. I use them to draw off excess heated air and heavy humidity in summer but at the moment they would lower the temperature too much.

When I was growing a lot more plants than I am now, I still used to run the exhaust fans on most winter days (or more especially nights). Now I don't, or not at the moment, anyway.

Most nights the temperatures rise to 21 to 23 degrees and normally don't fall below 16 degrees. Just what I earlier claimed was ideal. And the plants are loving it!

Even though I have recently not been able to give them the care they like and deserve, I have heaps of flowers, and some very healthy looking plants. It is a real respite from the cares of the day to go and spend half an hour just enjoying them.

And if it is too cold . . . ?

Of course, if your plant numbers are less, you are growing by natural light rather than using artificially lit stands or you grow in the general rooms of your home rather than a dedicated space, winter night temperatures will be more of a problem.

How do you know if temperatures are too cold? The African violets may stop growing and possibly stop flowering even if they are still getting plenty of light. The leaves may tend to curl downwards around the pot although they are not soft and wilted. Confirm with a thermometer that low temperatures are the cause of the problem.

Here are a few tried and true suggestions to follow if plants are suffering from the cold:

- ◆ Don't leave plants sitting on the window sill in a cool room when it is likely to be a cold night
- ◆ Keep the plants in the warmest room of the house. This isn't necessarily the area that is warmest during the day, but the one that stays warmest during the night. The presence of fridges and freezers and water heaters and any other appliances that are run at night will help add warmth.
- ◆ Wrap light stands with plastic sheeting (clear) to keep warmth in.
- ◆ Use artificial heating in the room.

An African violet wall hanging

A little while ago I was sent this photograph by a grower on the NSW coast, somewhat further north than where I live. This wall hanger for African violets works as an ideal solution for his situation. He is able to grow the plants in an outdoor sheltered location. But, of course, the whole idea could be adapted for indoors too.

Amongst other things, he said: “The violets are all different and the pots sit in another pot that is hooked on the leaf frame hanging on the wall. I set up a watering system on the back of the frame. The plants are only six months old.”

As you can see, the watering system is black plastic pipe, set up so the sections are easily filled and because the light cannot penetrate them there would be little problem with algae in the water.

The permanently fixed pots that encase the potted plants seems like a very good idea since it must be very easy to remove the plants when they need any attention, should it be leaching, spraying, potting, grooming—whatever.

I have reproduced the photo in quite a large size so you can see how it has been set up. There is just no end to the ingenuity of the African violet grower!



Growers are also pretty clever in devising ways of keeping their African violets warm in winter and cool in summer. I am thinking of collecting some of the ideas I see people use, and that they describe to me to make a useful article.

If you have some smart way of regulating the temperature your African violets are growing in I would really like to hear from you.

The African Violet Society of America

From time to time I mentioned that The African Violet Society of America's website is a great resource for all growers of African violets. What perhaps I have not said is that its magazine "African Violet Magazine" is an equally good reference. It is really worth belonging to the Society even if you do not live in the US, as indeed I do not. The magazine is full of useful information, as it always has been in all the issues I have ever seen.



I had occasion lately to be culling through my rather large collection of saved magazines and came across the cartoon shown here. It is from the "African Violet Magazine" of June, 1968—nearly 50 years ago. I have not belonged to AVSA for that length of time, I must admit, but a lot of stuff seems to find its way into my home. I have seen this cartoon in this issue before and I think it just completely hits the mark where enthusiasm for growing these lovely plants is concerned. The caption may be a bit too small to read, so let me tell you that what it says is "Mommy, is St. Paulia your patron saint?"

I don't know who created it and I hope I do not offend anyone by reproducing it. I hope it gives you a chuckle as it does me!

The website of The African Violet Society of America is: <http://www.avsa.org/>.

It is worthwhile to spend some time browsing the site because there is all sorts of information and a large collection of photographs. You will also see where you can join the Society, or you might want to join one of the local clubs, as there affiliates world-wide.

Let me tell you, there is nothing that will feed your addiction to African violets as much as joining a group of like-minded enthusiasts!

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