

September 2017

The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

A free download from www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net

Suddenly it is spring. Well, the weather over the last couple of weeks has been more summer than spring but that just seems to be the sudden change of seasons we have. In two short months I have gone from wondering how to keep the plants sufficiently warm to worrying about the heat both now and in the coming months.

More about heat and African violets next time but in the meanwhile this is an extremely busy time for those of us in the southern hemisphere where all the spring jobs now need doing. But if you are finding it difficult to get inspired to get on with these things, do visit one of the numerous Shows held in the spring.

You will find plenty to enjoy and also you can often buy more plants as well as meet people and perhaps join a group where you will find plenty of others who share your hobby. If you already belong to a group do think of exhibiting. It is another extension of your interest that is very worthwhile.

On page 4 there is a list of some shows around Australia this the spring.



Bunyip

My dinner table decoration for this week.

This semiminiature from Melbourne hybridiser Sue Gardner is described as "Single-semidouble pink pansy/darker eye, darker frilled edge"

A bunyip is a large, fierce mythological Australian creature but this plant was named not for that but for a town of that name near Melbourne.

This plant isn't in perfect condition but still is a bright accompaniment to meal times.

African violets in the bathroom—exploding a myth

Picture it – a bathroom with large windows opening onto a secluded courtyard filled with ferns, shrubs and flowers. In the bathroom are lush healthy house plants blending the indoors and the outside together. Here and there a lovely flowering African violet. It feels like bathing in a forest pool.



So how realistic is this?

If you want flowering house plants in your bathroom are African violets going to be the very thing to further enhance the look with carefully chosen flowers? Well, no, not really. Or at least not long term.

I recently saw a gardening website that recommended the bathroom as the ideal place for an African violet. I would have to disagree.

On the whole, African violets do not actually love a bathroom environment. Probably for this lush really beautiful fantasy you would be better with a large selection of foliage plants, but perhaps with just a few well-chosen flowering plants exchanged for others when they decline.

So, the theory is that the warmth and humidity of the bathroom will be just the thing for tropical plants. African violets are tropical so it is thought they will thrive here. Unfortunately that theory is mostly wrong.

Let us look at why this is so.

Light

Although in the wild African violets are found thriving in shady and semi-shady spots those are still a bit brighter than the interior of the average home. Although my opening fantasy has a bathroom with really large windows, the fact is that most bathrooms don't. The typical window is small. So bathrooms can be dark and dingy places for much of the day and unless the African violet is grown right on the windowsill it may not have sufficient light.

Temperature and humidity

Climate has a lot to do with this. It is often said that African violets enjoy the same conditions that people do, and this is what makes them such great house plants. The bathroom was beautifully warm and steamy this morning when you took a shower so it sounds suitable. But what was it like during the night? Do you have a window open even on cold nights to keep the air fresh? Does it feel cold in winter when not in use? After all, a bathroom is only used for a short period each day. At other times the temperature may fall drastically, especially during winter. We do not typically heat our bathroom when it is not being used. Night times in winter might be just too cold for African violets.

Even in summer bathroom temperatures may not be ideal.

Talcum powder

This can be the biggest problem in many bathrooms. The fine dust from talc settles on the leaves of the houseplants, including African violets. Many plants have more shiny smooth leaves and can be rinsed clean. African violet leaves are hairy. The talc is much, much more difficult to clean off them. If left it is not just unsightly, its effect is just like wrapping the plant in a blanket – It cuts down the light enormously. To say nothing of clogging up the stomates which are, loosely speaking, the breathing pores of the plant.

Lastly -

Who wants to have plants you can only enjoy when you are in the shower? Much more enjoyable in your living area. They like living with us—we might as well live with them.

An alternative—artificial light

Of course I understand that at times you need to use every available room to encompass your burgeoning African violet collection.

When that happens you can go to growing under artificial lights. This simplest of set-ups shows two fluorescent tubes mounted above a plain piece of board—and there you have a tabletop lightstand.

African violets can grow untroubled by weather or other considerations, and making what may have been a dark spot bright and beautiful.



Now just what makes an African violet wild?

I came across this while browsing the internet recently:

<http://www.ebay.com.au/gds/How-to-Kill-African-Violets-in-a-Lawn-/10000000205273268/g.html>

“How to Kill African Violets in a Lawn”. It is all about “wild” African violets and how to kill these weeds. A spoof of course, no doubt designed to make the curious click on it to then follow the links all of which take you to advertisements for various gardening products. And I did so click, and did follow the links.

And now I am really playing their game by passing on the link here.

I didn't see the funny side at first, since I seem to spend so much time helping people not to kill their African violets!

Some Shows being held in Australia

The following are coming up quite soon. If you can, do attend. Always worthwhile for the people you meet, the plants you see and what you buy!

These are in no particular order—just attend the one nearest you, or travel to all!

The African Violet Society of Queensland Annual Show will be held on 14/15 October at the Auditorium, Brisbane Botanic Gardens, Mt Coot-tha, Brisbane.

See: <http://www.africanvioletsocietyqld.happyo.com/>

The African Violet Society of South Australia will hold their show on 11 November at the Western Youth Centre, 79 Marion Road, Cowandilla, Adelaide

See: <http://www.africanvioletsa.com/coming-events.html>

Early Morn African Violet Group Annual Show will be on 18/19 November, at the Mount Waverley Community Centre, Mount Waverley, Melbourne.

See: <http://www.earlymornafricanviolets victoria.websyte.com.au/site.cfm?/earlymornafricanviolets victoria/2/>

African Violet Association of Australia African Violet and Gesneriad Show will be on 4 November—a one day only show. Held at the Burwood RSL Club, 96 Shaftesbury Road, Burwood, Sydney. (See image below). This is the show I will be going to.

See: <http://www.africanviolet.org.au>



The poster features a collage of African violet and gesneriad plants in various colors including red, purple, white, pink, and lavender. The text is centered on a white background with a black border.

African Violet and Gesneriad Show 2017

Presented by
The African Violet Association of Australia

On Saturday 4 November 2017 (one day only)
10.00 am to 4.00 pm

At the Burwood RSL Club, 96 Shaftesbury Road, Burwood

Don't miss the opportunity to see, and perhaps buy, these wonderful plants!

EEK—Mites!!

A couple of months ago I found this!

It was on a bottom shelf and right at the back. It had not been in easy view and it was a case of out of sight and out of mind.

If you have ever wondered what a case of mites in an African violet looks, wonder no more. If you find you have such a problem I hope you discover it before it gets as bad as this. Even the slightest “odd” look of the centre leaves of the plant should start the alarm bells ringing.

What can you do to prevent this problem?

Try to use as good hygiene with your plants as you can. Wash hands after touching outdoor plants before working with the violets, and don't bring plants into your collection from other sources without a period of isolation. Inspect your plants regularly. This last is where I fell down, of course.



What can you do if it happens (and it will)?

Firstly, deal with the problem as soon as you notice it. Not next week, not tomorrow, not even later today. Now. Pick up the plant and remove it from the area. Wash your hands. Check other plants, being especially careful with those that were near the infected one. Remove any that show signs of mites.

It is my belief that the plants that show signs of infestation should be immediately discarded. Either burn or wrap and place in the garbage collection. If one of the plants is a “one off” and you cannot get another then take an unmarked leaf or two for propagation. These leaves should be washed in weak solution of chlorine bleach and then planted. Keep covered with a transparent dome until healthy plantlets start to grow.

Should the plant be a chimera thus one that will not propagate “true” from leaf, it is acceptable to cut the centre right out of the plant, removing all leaves that show the slightest sign of mite. Do leave some outer leaves. You will need to spray the remains of the plant really well and then enclose in some sort of dome, terrarium or clear plastic bag until healthy looking shoots start to grow. It should then be sprayed again and returned to ordinary growing conditions until the little shoots are large enough to take off and plant individually in small pots.

Now what about the plants that don't seem to be damaged at all?

They should be sprayed with a miticide. Even if they seem OK, they can quite easily have some mites on them. They are very small and cannot normally be seen with the naked eye, but need a high power magnifying glass. But that doesn't matter. Don't trust how they look. Spray anyway. I cannot tell you what product to use because what is available is constantly varying and it depends in what country you live, anyway. You will need to spray three times at 7 to 10 day intervals.

And keep a good watch. **Yes, I did all that, and now everything seems fine.**

Having your cake and eating it too — the African violet way!

If you are properly enthusiastic about your African violet growing, there will be times when you have more different violets than you actually have space to grow them. So what can you do?

Give some away? Toss them in the compost bin? Sell them? Those would all be good solutions to the dilemma, but there is a catch. The thing is this. African violet growers on the whole cannot let a plant variety go without taking a leaf and growing some new ones. I know, I do it myself. This way you tend to replace one plant discarded with eventually several newer versions. Now the collection can get really out of hand.

But that is the solution to the problem, really. The only practical solution. Propagate. It sounds as though that means you have more plants coming, not less, but read on.

You only have space to grow 20 good sized plants? Fine, grow, say 18 and use the rest of the space for “ladies in waiting”- potted leaves that take very little space, and are there when you decide you want a change of plants. This way you can cycle the plants always just growing a smaller number but having the others ready to take over when needed.

The way to succeed is just be sure you stick by one very important rule: Don't pot up and try to grow on extra plants. Give the spares away unpotted, or throw them away.

The above is pretty well impossible for most of us. We often find ourselves with a freshly potted new plant in hand, standing among the plants already in place, and thinking “Now where can this possibly fit?” But there are people who can discipline themselves like this. I know some of them. They tend to be the people who grow excellent plants because of their approach to their growing.

If your space is limited you should give it a try. I should give it a try!

So how do you propagate?

If you don't grow your African violets from leaves you are missing out on half the joy of growing, anyway.

The simplest, and most common method of propagating African violets is from leaf.

Propagating African violets from a leaf

I am sure I have talked about this before, and I know I treated it at length in my book. But anyway here are a few pointers.

- Make sure the leaf you choose to plant is strong and healthy and not too old. Of course if you are given a leaf that is less than ideal but you really want the variety, then you must try with what you have.
- The best time of year to propagate is spring, but any warm time of year is fine. Even

winter can be tried if you have good warm conditions.

- While it is quite possible to root a leaf in water, I find it more satisfactory to do so in the same potting mix I use for my plants. It saves trouble in the long run.
- It is mostly recommended to cut the leaf stem to around one to two centimetres long. Cut the end on a slant so that the cut edge is facing upward of the front of the leaf. This is intended to help the plantlets which grow from the cut edge to grow to have an easier passage upwards into the light. The slanting cut simply increases the area from which new plantlets can grow.
- Once the leaf is planted water it gently with warm water.
- Keep it in a good light and keep it moist until it has rooted. After that it should also be treated to regular dilute fertiliser.
- The baby plantlets may come up as soon as six weeks, but take longer if the conditions are not ideal or if the leaf is older.
- Each leaf may produce numerous plantlets, but an average is around six.
- When the plantlets are growing strongly, with the largest leaves at least the size of your thumbnail, empty the whole lot out of the pot and divide up to see what is there. It is probably not a good idea to pot up all the plantlets! Just keep the strongest looking with the best root systems. One may be all you need, two gives you something for just in case, and three gives you one for a friend. Best not to go further than that.
- Pot each plantlet that are you are keeping into its own small pot. Moisten and place in your normal growing area. Don't fertilise for a couple of weeks, and then fertilise normally
- Pot into larger size pots regularly until the 100 mm flowering pot is reached.

The photographic sequence is taken from "African Violets for Everyone"



Powdery Mildew

As we come into spring the weather here has been very dry. No rain and constant strong dry winds. This normally happens only for a short period so we don't take any particular steps to increase humidity for the African violets but just endure it. They usually come through pretty well—except for powdery mildew.



These dry conditions, combined with warm days and cool nights seem to be the ideal conditions for mildew to bloom on the flowers of the African violets.

I found this plant of 'Edge of Darkness' very badly affected. The very dark flowers show up the mildew very easily. It is always much easier seen on dark flowers than on light ones, but the light coloured ones are not immune. In some cases it is also visible on the leaves.

The flowers that have mildew on them are usually ruined and if the problem is left untreated many flowers and some leaves also can be lost. So as with most diseases, the sooner it is dealt with the better.

Fortunately it is not difficult to treat. There are a number of easily found products in the nurseries that can be used, but sometimes it is not necessary to go to that extent. There are many simple home recipes that will do the trick and because they only use simple household products they are not toxic and you don't have to take serious precautions before spraying.

Spray with:

- Bicarb soda at the rate of 1 tsp to 1 litre of water
- Vinegar used at 1 tsp per 1 litre of water (Note: I have not actually tried this one)
- Milk can be used as a spray at the rate of one part in ten of water
- Neem oil used at the dilution rate recommended on package
- Chlorine bleach can be used but as it is damaging to all plants it must be mixed quite weak. Start at only a few drops in a litre and see how it goes. I suggest this because I have found damage on plants when spraying with any bleach solution.

What did I do? Well, I just sprayed with plain warm water. I added a few drops of insecticidal soap which isn't a bad idea with any of the other options. I repeated a couple of times. The problem will come back until the weather changes.

It is almost impossible to prevent mildew. The spores always seem to be present. Just try to give them as little encouragement as possible, and hope for a change in the weather.

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