

November 2017

# The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

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I am very sorry that this newsletter is rather late in the month getting away. Shows, plants, spring, family—what can I say. It has been a busy time. I will try to be earlier come January but no promises!

Before that there is the Christmas holiday period. I would like to wish all a happy, healthy time, no matter what holiday you celebrate. May your life be filled with flowers.



## Seen at the African Violet Association Show

For me one of the highlights was this lovely plant of Jays' Icecastle. It was created some years ago by local hybridisers Jenny and Pete White and is a lovely plant to grow. Not so easy to get the variegated leaves looking so good though. No wonder the entry won "Best Trailing African Violet". I must look after my plant a little better.

But the show was full of lovely things as the photograph shows. There is no end to the pleasure to be had in looking around shows to see what others are growing and maybe spy something new. Or see something you grew years ago! More photographs on p.7.



## The Wicked Plant Story

(OK—The Wick Watered Plant Story)

*Well, here we are. I'm in a mood to start experimenting again!*

### **Wick Watering**

Perhaps before getting onto the problems of the wicks we should just revise what Wick Watering is.

It is a method of watering plants by using a wick (a synthetic cord of various types) to draw water up into a pot. It depends upon the potting mix in the pot being of a suitable texture to absorb the water as it flows up the wick by capillary action, to being able to remain moist and yet to provide sufficient air to the roots of the plant.

As can be seen, the proper working of the system depends on a harmony between the potting mix and the wick.

Here are two illustrations (which you may have seen before) that show how to go about wick watering.



*The photograph at left shows a pot with the wick attached standing on a likely reservoir for the water/fertiliser solution.*

*At right, this photo shows a plant in a pot and being placed on a reservoir with fertiliser solution in it.*

*So long as the potting mix and the wick are moist to start, the wick should draw up water to the plant as it is depleted from the mix.*



I began watering my African violets by the wicking method after only having grown them for a few years. At that time, at least among the people I knew who were growing these plants, wicking was rather new and for some a somewhat questionable means of doing the watering.

I was encouraged by the fact that it promised greater convenience and an end to the wet/dry cycle so common with other watering. One person I knew had learned wick watering and showed us. I couldn't wait to get started and soon did wick water almost all plants that I grew indoors. My current method is virtually the same as it was when I began. I have tried out different wick materials over time but my basics remain the same. I am very happy with the results.

In the following years I have heard many other growers telling how they go about wick-watering, and it surprises me still that these are somewhat different from what I do. I have been told about the wick needing to be in the centre of the pot, that it should only come up 10 to 20 mm into the potting mix, that a knot should be tied (very loosely) to prevent it falling out

of the pot, that the thickness of the wick should be varied in accordance with the size of the pot and plant, and so on. Sometimes I have followed these suggestions for a while, but I must confess I have always eventually returned to my old ways.

So now I have decided that it is time to experiment to decide whether I would be wise to change to doing things a little differently.

### ***My Standard Method***

The way I normally wick my plants goes like this: I use two thicknesses of acrylic knitting yarn. I usually buy 8 or 12 ply at the cheapest of sources so that its quality is poor and it actually is a bit variable in thickness. I don't measure the length of wick. I just wind the yarn around my hand as many times as I want and cut through the thicknesses. I knot the two pieces together close to the end. This is the end that will go into the water. Having two wicks knotted together makes it easier to easily put them into the hole in a reservoir, or the slot in a tray. I do not knot the wick where it goes into the potting mix.

I run the wicks up through one of the drain holes, usually plentifully supplied in the pots I use. I have no problem with the wick falling out of the pot with its lack of a knot, for I simply hold it in place with my fingers until I have potted the plant. If the wick is actually showing above the top of the potting mix I pull it down a bit so as it isn't unsightly. Job done!

### ***The things I have decided to test are these:***

- The importance of the thickness of the wick
- Whether it matters if the wick goes right up the side of the pot or only just slightly into the mix
- Whether it matters if any knot tied is tight or loose



*Secret Love: a plant worthy of the experiment*

### ***I began on 23 October 2017.***

I had numerous plantlets of 'Secret Love', an African violet of which I am very fond and obviously didn't want to lose for I see had planted several leaves. I selected ten plantlets from among them, and removed some leaves and roots until they were all approximately the same.

These plantlets were each potted into 70mm pots filled with the same slightly moist mix. The mix consisted of equal parts of peat, perlite and vermiculite. The pH tested at around 6.6. The only difference between the pots was the wicks used.

See photo 1 on the following page. Note that they were planted in any order. The numbers refer to the wicks only and not the plantlets. There are small unavoidable differences in the plants, but during the length of this experiment, they should prove of only minor importance. Over months, the plants will appear pretty much the same.

### **The wicks**

I used acrylic knitting yarn, supposedly 8 ply, in varying numbers of strands for some of the pots- 1, 2, 4, 6 & 12 strands. Using 12 wicks in a 70 mm pot sounds ridiculous, and if the suggestion often quoted over the years is correct this plant should quickly become water-logged. Earlier trials have shown me that is not necessarily the case, and so I am not concerned. In fact it has so far been my belief that although it is possible to have too thin a wick, it is not usually possible to have it too thick. I used two lots of six strands for this one as that was as much as I could pull through the drain holes of the pot. The knots in these wicks are at the ends of the wick that will go into the water. These are numbered 1-5 in the accompanying photo.

I did two pots to test the tight knot/loose knot theory using in each case two strands of acrylic. (Nos. 6 & 7) In these cases (only) the wick is in the end that goes into the pot. This will show whether in this case a tight knot stops the wicking action.

In the cases of 6 & 7 the wick will only contact the potting mix in the first couple of centimetres at the bottom of the pot. The other wicks will be drawn up the side of the pot.

I also used some Nycrame (This was a nylon mycrame cord that we used for wicks in the 70s and 80s. It was a great product, no longer available, but it wicked readily and never stopped). My experimental pots have one strand and two strands of Nycrame. (Nos. 8 & 9)

With my small stock of Nycrame there was also some butcher's twine that I was using at one time. I did one more pot with a single strand of that. (No. 10)

Along with these ten small pots I planted one really much more advanced plant into an 80mm pot and am growing it alongside the others. I did say I am very fond of this African violet!

**Note:** I have made no attempt to decide whether it is better to have the wick in the exact centre of the base of the pot or not. I am not going to drill extra holes in a pot already amply supplied with 16 or so anyway. One of those will do me as it always has.

When potted, the ten plants were placed in a tray with about 10mm of water to moisten them properly. I was interested to see that all apparently became moist at the same rate.



Photo 1—the plants



Photo 2—the wicks

Following my normal practice I kept the small plants on this tray for three weeks, watering only by carefully applying little more than a skin of plain water in the bottom of the tray when it became dry.

### ***Onto a wicking tray***

Three weeks later, on 13 November, after making sure the wicks were damp, I placed them on one of my large community watering trays with their wicks now in the water. I used a fertiliser dilution rate of only half my normal strength. This will be topped up with my normal strength fertiliser as the level falls and so will gradually become stronger.

All the plantlets appeared to be evenly moist and, to the hand, weighed around the same. None were obviously over-wet.

The plants had made very little growth at this stage, but they should be busy producing roots.

### ***Now to just wait and see what eventuates as the plants grow!***

I will report on these plants as they develop. I would have to say it will no doubt take some time before differences in growth become obvious.

### ***Caution***

This will not really constitute proof of anything. I do not have the resources to grow the number of plants necessary to do any conclusive proving.

What this does is indicate to me which way I should go in the future. I am finding it interesting, and as usual I am assuming that others will do so too!

## **Coir peat under review**

Around July last year I tried out using coir instead of sphagnum peat moss in my potting mix for African violets. I set this up as an experiment, keeping the plants separate so I could watch their progress. I reported about the experiment in "The African Violet Way"

When the plants I put in a mix with coir peat were happily growing and flowering four months later I declared the experiment was a success for me. I said I would cautiously go over to using a potting mix based on coir peat.

I had been told by some growers whose opinions I respect and whose plants I admire, that the plants were likely to stop growing after just a couple of months and that it wasn't successful for plants grown by wick watering. However I was buoyed up by the fact that I also know a number of growers who use a coir mix extensively in their collections and have remarkable success.

Caution said not to go too far, so and so I have taken it slowly. I still had some sphagnum peat left and have potted some plants in that and some in the coir peat mix. I must also point out that I have not had the opportunity to pot many plants at all in the last six months, and that I have rather fewer plants at the moment than I had a year or two ago. This does make it easier to check how individual plants have grown.

My results with the coir mix are rather variable. Some of the plants potted in it have indeed grown slowly achieving only a fairly small size after 8 or 9 months of growing. Others, have done very well.

***So what causes the problems?*** I have read quite a lot of material on the use of coir recently and have talked to quite a few growers.

I wonder about the variable nature of the coir. Could this be why some plants are doing better than others? And why some have flowered well while others have few flowers or none?

There is another anomaly in that it is suggested that leaves will become pale or yellow as well as small – mine are a good rich green although in some cases they have not grown out to the size one would expect.

***These are the points (problems) that I have gleaned so far.*** Of course I might not be understanding correctly so don't necessarily take this as fact without doing your own research.

- Coir does not decompose as quickly as sphagnum peat. One would think this would be a plus because it would not become acid so quickly but apparently there are problems.
- The carbon/nitrogen balance in coir is different from that in sphagnum peat moss. The carbon value is much higher. This means that the plants may lack nitrogen, which is what gives you nice rich green leaves of good size. It may be necessary to use a fertiliser with more nitrogen.
- Coir often contains salts of various kinds not as heavily present in sphagnum peat moss. These come from processing of the coir. Potassium is one thing that is often heavily present. Potassium is needed by the plants for flowering and to improve the overall hardiness of the plant. Our fertilisers are often heavily endowed with potassium.
- It seems that using coir may lead to a lack of calcium and magnesium. An excess of potassium can lead to a deficiency of nitrogen and perhaps of magnesium and manganese. I presume that these may be added in fertiliser. In fact it seems that calcium is often added in processing.
- Coir may not be adequately composted is something I have read. I am still not exactly sure what effect this may have.

I do think that for me the undesirable salts in coir may have had an effect on my plants. I have noticed that many miniatures and semiminiatures that were planted in a coir mix have a yellowish crystal stain on the centre leaves. In some cases the centre has completely gone. Perhaps regular leaching might have prevented this happening, but I was unable to carry this out over the last 6 months. In any case I am not sure I want to use a mix that requires leaching every week or so.

The advantages of using a mix based on coir are easy to see. First convenience. What could be simpler than just buying a brick of coir at the hardware store, standing it in a bucket of water and then finally using the resultant coir in potting mix? A lot less trouble than chasing around for high quality sphagnum peat moss. The second advantage of coir is that it is a renewable resource whereas the harvesting of sphagnum should be avoided in order to preserve the world's swamp ecology.

So what now? More research for a start. And probably more experimentation. I really don't want to become a coir expert. I just want to see how I can use it to grow my African violets and other pot plants with minimal problems.

## Found on the Internet

### *“Tip for African Violets*

Did you know there is an easy way to grow bright, big African Violets?

Just add a few rusty nails to the soil! The nails slowly release iron that the plants LOVE and helps them to grow.”

Try it out if you must. For my money, though it is much better to use a balanced fertiliser with trace elements.

## The African Violet Association of Australia Show— More Photographs

*That’s enough heavy stuff for now! Let’s look at something beautiful.*

Here are some photographs of plants that attracted my interest at the show on 4 November.



1. *Heinz’s Starfish* (hybridised by Heinz Dornbusch)

2. *Fairy Gate* (hybridised by Margaret Taylor)

3. *Colonial Mount Remarkable*—one of the local Colonial series. I could not resist the crystalline beauty of this single bloom.

4. *Arctic Frost* (S. Sorano) - coincidentally the one shown not of local origin.



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