

January 2018

# The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

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Over recent months I have not only been tidying up old photographs but I have been doing some repotting. Not in the last two weeks I must say as the weather has turned extremely hot and I prefer not to repot plants that are already stressed.

I am very fortunate to be situated where it is rather insulated from the series of heat waves that has been scouring the country, but there are still some very hot days. However, I have managed to get quite a lot of repotting done. I won't say things are up to date. As you would know, if you grow a lot of plants it only takes a day or two for something new to need attention. But I do think I am getting there again. And at least the watering is up to date.

In particular I am trying to get some good plants of trailing African violets going once more. I am not sure why it should be so, but pink trailers always seem to do the best for me. I suppose I should try to collect a few good trailers in blue to even things up a bit.

My most successful trailer ever has been 'Happy Trails'. I was first given a leaf of this back in 1982. I had a number of plants that did well after that, with a couple of Queen of Shows and and of Best Trailer. My present plant is quite small so I am not going to show you a photo of it, but of the plant I had in the past. Well, of a section of it, at least.

Trailers may come and trailers may go, but I can't help loving this one. 'Happy Trails' was hybridised by Lyndon Lyon, and the description reads "Double dark rose-pink star. Medium green pointed (foliage)."



It is a semiminiature trailer and was registered in 1991. It was around for a long time before that. In fact this picture is from before that! But it can still compete with other more recent trailers.

So I hope everyone's African violet endeavours are progressing well also, and that you are able to face the New Year of 2018 with hope and good cheer.

## My Wicked Plants

### *The Wick Watering Experiment*

In the last issue I discussed the experiment that I had begun to do with wick watering.

To recap: I wanted to decide:

- whether it is necessary to vary the size of the wicks according to the size of the pot and the plant,
- whether there is any difference between drawing the wick up the side of the pot or just having it come into the pot a very short distance, and
- whether it matters (if you tie a knot just above where the wick enters the pot) if the knot is loose or drawn very tight.

To do this I potted 10 plants of the same cultivar (Secret Love) having trimmed the roots and removed leaves until they were all fairly much the same. The pots had different wicks in them. The photograph on the right illustrates. The wicks in each pot defines that plant.

For other details already described, see the November 2017 issue of “The African Violet Way”.

I potted the plants on 23 October 2017.

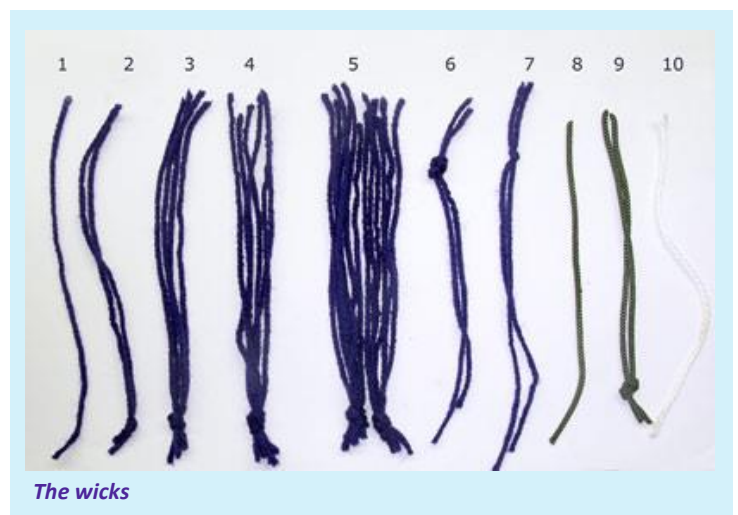
Growth was slow initially, presumably because there was little root on any of the plantlets. At the time of writing (early January) the plants are now growing well. That is except for number 2, to which something catastrophic has occurred, as all the leaves except one have disappeared. I assume some sort of insect has got in and had a feast. A cricket, perhaps? The remaining leaf is growing on gamely.

All the others are growing well, but there are some differences to be seen at this stage. To be honest I don't think that means anything right now. I believe in a few more months there will be some evening out of the growth of the plants. But here is what is happening at the moment.

I am surprised to see that with numbers 6 & 7 the growth of 6 (loosely tied knot) is greater than that of 7 (tightly tied knot). This may only be temporary as I don't see any difference in the dampness of the potting mix in each.

The one with the best growth (by a very small degree) is number 5 – with twelve thicknesses of yarn for wick. The next best is number 9 which has two thicknesses of Nycrame.

The mix in the pots seems equally moist in each case and none of the pots seems extremely heavy when lifted as it would if waterlogged.



I believe the growth differences will very likely disappear as the plants grow. They are all being fertilised with the same normal African violet fertiliser. We'll see what they look like in another couple of months.

By the way, remember the other plant I mentioned, that was a little more advanced, whose roots and leaves I did not trim and which is in a larger pot? It has been flowering for a few weeks now. Good roots makes all the difference to how quickly a young plants gets growing.

Photographs of the plants in the next issue, by which time they should have shown a real indication of how they will grow.

## Coir peat under review

Last issue I mentioned about the possible difficulties with using a potting mix based on coir. Some plants I had been growing in this mix seemed OK initially but then stalled. Not after the two to three months that I had been told but after six or seven months—or more.

So after a lot of reading and talking with other growers here is what I am now doing.

1. I have make up some mix of my normal ingredient proportions but the peat is made up 50% of coir and 50% sphagnum peat. I am also adding a small amount of blood and bone fertiliser in the mix to help counteract any possible difficulties because of lack of nitrogen. After the plants have been in the mix for a month or so I intend to give a once only application of Nitrosol (derived from blood and bone).

I note that using fertilisers like blood and bone in the mix is said not to be satisfactory in soilless mix and with wick watering. Nitrosol is also considered not to be satisfactory in wick watering. That may be so, but I have had some success in the past using the blood and bone in the mix and I knew of at least one very good grower who regularly fertilised, by wick, with Nitrosol. So I am trying using these anyway. It always seems a good thing to question conventional wisdoms to see whether they hold true in one's own conditions.

2. I have examined the fertilisers I have been using and found that they all contain a fairly high proportion of potassium. Normally this would be a good thing since that would promote flowering. However, given that my reading indicates that coir peat in itself may have too much potassium I am now using a fertiliser that has slightly less potassium.

My review is ongoing. Perhaps I need to grow some plants in coir mix side-by-side with the same plants in a sphagnum peat mix. I don't want to do that unless I have to.

As I stated before I don't need to become an expert on the use of coir in potting mixes. I just want to be able to work out how I can use it without any problems. The convenience of using coir makes it worthwhile to give it a good try.

Of course, I won't have any real results for six months or so. Gardening of all kinds really does teach patience, even if we learn nothing else from our endeavours.

## Retrospective

*If an artist can have a “retrospective” show of works why can’t an African violet lover?*

Over the Christmas/New Year holiday period I have been spending some time tidying up the photographs on my computer. All my old plant photographs in prints and transparencies have been scanned for use on the computer, and I have been putting their names on and filing them in a reasonable order. This has given me a wonderful chance to look at pictures of the African violets I grew in years gone by.

When I started growing (in the late 1970s) it wasn’t so easy to get new hybrids as it became later and so the older ones were loved and grown, and indeed in the case of some of them I wonder why I don’t still have them. A surprising number of what I grew in the late 80s and through the 90s were quite old hybrids. And none the worse for that I must say.

Here is a pictorial list of some of early hybrids I enjoyed over many years and now I wonder why I don’t still have them. We all become greedy for the newer hybrids and naturally something has to be discarded to make space. But at least I still have the photos.

This plant *Edna Fischer* is the oldest hybrid in my collection of photographs. It is actually registered in 1953 and appears as #201 in First Class where it is described as “Double red/white edge. Quilted, wavy (foliage)”. You will notice that the red is a lot more bluish than some of the reds we grow today and I seem to remember the flowers being rather smaller than some plants have. The wavy foliage wouldn’t be as popular today as it was then, either. Still I enjoyed it for some twenty years or so.



*Edna Fischer*

My second oldest variety shown here is *Happy Time*. Hybridised by Lyndon Lyon, it was registered in 1968. It is described as a “Double rose pink star. Quilted”. It grew to a good shape with minimum fuss although it might not have had enough flowers to compare with the plants we grow today. It also stayed in my collection for a long, long time.



*Happy Time*

Thirdly ‘Lavender Delight’ from 1972. This seems to me to have been a great plant, or perhaps only a great plant of its time. The description is “Double light lavender star/darker fantasy. Medium green, plain”. I always found it grew really easily and could quickly produce a plant for show. It won many awards for me (and for others too). The photograph is of the plant that won me my first Best in Show in 1984. It flowered wonderfully well, sometimes producing 25 or more flowers from a leaf axil. Perhaps many would not have liked it because of its large leaves and rather robust growing habit. However that may be I was still growing it until ten years or so ago. Why don’t I have it now? I am really not sure.



*Lavender Delight*

My next oldie is *Sweet Mary*. This is a very pretty flower, and was beloved of some of us as our Secretary was called Mary. I didn't realise when I was growing it in the 1990s that it was registered as far back as in 1973. It's description goes "Double plum-wine star/darker veins. Plain, quilted, oval." I had it right through the 1980s and beyond and if I saw it I would very likely grow it again since I now have a daughter-in-law called Mary.



*Sweet Mary*

*Amazing Grace* is the only one of those I am listing here that I feel sure is probably still being grown locally as I have seen it in shows. "Semidouble light pink frilled star. Ruffled" doesn't quite do it justice. The pale pink flowers look amazingly delicate with their frilled edges. I suppose the ruffled leaves may be off putting for some growers, but it truly is not that hard to grow. It dates from 1975.



*Amazing Grace*

*Pamela*, described as "Double medium blue star. Plain quilted" was registered in 1977. Its star-shaped flowers always had 8 to 10 petals rather than 5 to 6. It therefore had a very special look. It was very reliable, too. I grew it until the mid-1990s. This photograph is of a plant of mine in one of the shows along the way.



*Pamela*

*Granger's Wonderland*. This plant is an absolute classic while having a quite unassuming appearance. It dates from 1979. The First Class description goes "Semidouble light blue frilled. Plain, ruffled". That doesn't all that exciting, and to tell the truth the plant isn't exciting compared to many more modern hybrids. Its reliability is the thing that really delights, though. Although it is described as having ruffled foliage I have never seen a plant that didn't just have plain and easily grown leaves. It has won countless show awards over the years and decorated many a home too.



*Granger's Wonderland*

*China Pink* is from 1978. It won my devotion for many years because of its truly dark leaves which contrasted so well with the pale flowers. It is described as "Semidouble peach-pink star. Plain" It is classified as large, and it does grow very large, but the flat even growing leaves and the delightful flowers still make it a gorgeous plant.



*China Pink*

And I haven't even mentioned *Lilian Jarrett*, the first variegated African violet plant I ever saw. I can tell you that when I bought it I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, with its peach pink flowers and mosaic variegated leaves. Nor have I had anything to say about *Chocolate Chip* or *Startling*, the first ever fantasy flowered violets I had. The reason is that I apparently didn't take photos at that time. . .

So where are the plants of yesteryear? Or, putting it differently, where have all the old flowers gone?

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### Whatever is This?

*Have you ever had something like this appear on your African violet? If you haven't been growing African violets for long you might wonder what it is and how it got there.*

It is actually a seed pod that has formed from a flower on the plant. The withered petals are visible, and if you look carefully you can see the pollen sacs just below the berry that is the fruit of the African



**So first of all how did it get there?** One of the most common ways for flowers to become fertilised in African violets is an infestation of thrips. They love to invade the pollen sacs and they tend to spread the pollen. It isn't surprising if some of it lands on the female part of the flower and this leads to fertilisation with the consequent growth of the seed pod. If you see pods like this then do check your plants carefully for thrips.

And also some hybrids whose flowers naturally seem to shed their pollen more freely than others. This could result in the flower being fertilised.

**How long does it take for the seed to be ready to plant?** Apparently it can take as long as 9 months or as little as 4 months. I have been told that if the pod appears ripe earlier than 4 months it likely does not have seed in it. I believe 5 to 6 months may be average.

*Here is the seed pod or berry removed from the plant. If the seeds were wanted for growing more plants it would not be taken off the plant until it begun to dry and split.*

**Should you keep it and plant the seed? What sort of plants would grow from them?** Seed pods like this one that just appear unbidden on a plant are what is called a "selfing". That is to say that the same plant is both mother and father. Although there is always the chance that something interesting might result, when I have ever planted this seed the plants have always seemed like a degraded version of the parent. But with an enquiring mind and the time and space, plant them and see for yourself?

**What should you do if you want to actually grow some new African violets from seed?** This is a whole subject of its own. I may have an article on that subject some time in the future.

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