

March 2019



The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

A free download from www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net

Ah, well, summer seems to be over. For weeks now I have been telling myself that it is too hot to do any repotting. The poor plants had enough stress as it was as the heat waves seemed to come back-to-back and it was actually all I could do to keep everything watered.

As a tip for hot weather—because the plants are taking up so much more water than in cooler times they may be also taking up too much fertiliser if they are on a wick watering system or capillary matting. Making the fertiliser weaker is certainly a good option. So is leaching the plants through with clear fresh water—lukewarm of course.

Now, it is time for me to really get doing and repot a lot of plants. There are young ones that need to go into larger pots, and older ones that need to be rejuvenated. It can be a lot of work—but then I am never happier than when working with the plants and with some beautiful music playing.

Gentility



I have featured this one before, but I can't help that. I am very fond of it. It is doing so well lately, although I did have to take some dead flowers off. The wonderful thing is that that greenish-white ruffled edge is still very prominent despite all the heat we have had. Great plant, especially if this is your colour preference.

The close-up photo on the top of the page is also Gentility.

The description is:

Semidouble-double shaded mauve/white edge. Variegated dark green and cream. (M Taylor)

Using Sphagnum Moss in Potting Mix

In the last issue of “The African Violet Way” I said I was using a mix with just peat moss and perlite. I have continued with this as it is simplicity itself to mix. The results have been good. The trick is to get the proportions correct, and to make sure the pH is within the range of 6.3 to 6.8.

I am finding that about 60% perlite and 40% peat is just about correct **given the peat and perlite I have at present**. I use a coarse grade perlite, although I must admit that any time I buy new perlite I am surprised by what I get. At the moment what I have is quite coarse and very satisfactory.

My present perlite (I test anew every time I open a fresh bag) has a pH of somewhere between 6 & 6.5 and the peat moss a pH of 3.5. Quite a bit of correction needs to be done to make a mix that is OK for pH. This is done by adding dolomite lime and leaving the mix to mature for some weeks.

So, I have seen many plants grown in a potting mix that was too acid (the most usual difficulty) or even too alkaline. The result isn't good!

And yet—

Sphagnum moss—the best rooting medium of all.

I mentioned last time that it seems worthwhile to try mixes with sphagnum moss, rather than the sphagnum peat moss. A number of growers have tried them and been happy. I have used it (chopped) in my potting mix for some other plants but not normally for African violets.

Some years ago I took some cuttings of Paliavana (an African violet cousin) to a meeting to give to somebody who wanted to grow it. It turned out that he was unable to come to that meeting so I brought the cuttings home. I wrapped the stems in moist sphagnum (not chopped) and put the bundle in a pot which sat on the end of a shelf for some time until I was able to pass them on a month later. By that time the pot was a mass of roots. The cuttings were very happy in their damp sphagnum.

More recently, I had some tiny cuttings of a micro-miniature Sinningia to give to people at a meeting. Some three weeks later I realised that there was one piece left in the box. It was slightly wilted but I wrapped the stem in sphagnum and put the bundle in a small pot. I placed it on the shelf and a bit later found the little plant growing happily and full of flowers. In fact some four months later I felt it was good enough to enter it in a show.

So you would have to agree that sphagnum is a great rooting medium. But—wait a moment! The pH of my sphagnum moss is just 3 on the scale. That is very, very acid. And I did nothing to

What is pH

The pH scale measures the acidity /alkalinity of materials—in our case of the potting mix. It is a scale of 1-14. 7 is neutral.

In common with most other plants, African violets prefer the potting mix to be a little below neutral. Ideally a pH of 6.3 and 6.8 but slightly outside this range usually works out with no problems.

It is in this range that most of the nutrients in the mix and fertiliser are available to the plant. Too high or too low a pH can cause very definite problems.

correct it in either of these two instances. Admittedly the water supply here is around 8.3 but that does not seem to change the potting material much. I really don't know why it is that the plants do so well. But it has to be related to the air spaces that are apparent in the structure of the sphagnum moss, even though it holds a lot of water.

But can I use it satisfactorily for African violets? I thought I had better give it a try.

I had two similar plantlets of the same variety with no roots. I planted one in the long fibres of sphagnum in a small pot (70 mm) with no correction of the pH. The other I planted in a similar size pot with the ordinary mix of perlite and peat moss that I was using at the time.

When I use sphagnum moss in potting mix, incidentally, I chop it coarsely. I like the pieces around 10 mm long. I do not grind it up finely because I think that will make a material that packs down too closely and will hold too much water. In its own structure, sphagnum moss is both a great aerator and retains lots of moisture.



On the far left is the root ball of the plant in the straight sphagnum moss. The entire mass of the sphagnum is holding together with strong healthy roots.

The other photo shows the roots of the plant in the regular mix. The roots, although healthy have not yet invested the entire pot at this stage.

These plantlets (RD's Illusion) have been in these pots only seven weeks, starting with no roots at all.



The differences between the two plants was also clearly visible in the leaves.

The sphagnum moss plant on the far left is a little larger, and its leaves are a richer green. Both have been receiving the same fertiliser and watering.

Over recent days the standard mix plant has improved somewhat, so I am wondering if the differences will be less apparent as the plants grow.

I decided that it was necessary to also try a potting mix based on chopped sphagnum moss and a mix of just perlite and vermiculite. This time I did correct the mixes for their pH, so it was some weeks later when I was happy with the pH that I planted the two similar plantlets in these mixes. Neither plant has made very much progress since it has been so short a time since they were planted.



A little more than three weeks ago these plantlets with no roots were planted in a mix of chopped sphagnum moss and perlite (far left) and in a mix of perlite and vermiculite at the immediate left.

Once again it can be seen that the roots of the plants in the mix with sphagnum moss are much more advanced, although both have made good progress in this short time.



These two plants have only been in these pots for a short while, and although they were about the same size to start with, difference in size and (as shown above) root development have become obvious. They were small side-shoots from The Alps, and thus had no roots.

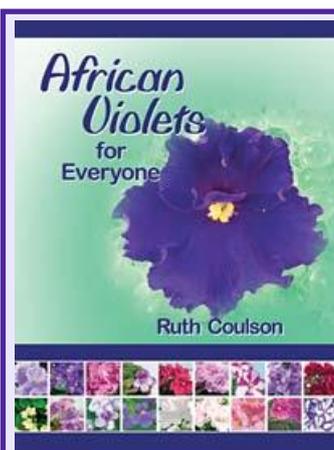
I was completely unsurprised to find that in both cases the plain sphagnum moss and the mix with sphagnum moss as a component came up trumps!

One thing I will note here is this. Going on my experience with other plants I have grown in mixes that are based on chopped sphagnum moss, it is very easy for the plant to become too wet. A coarse perlite is essential. In these cases above, the plants are in only small pots. When potting them up, I will have to think about how to use a mix with much less sphagnum.

I am not quite sure what to do with the one in pure long-fibre sphagnum. It is probably not a good idea to try to grow it in that for the long term, but if I were to repot it, how will I go about removing the sphagnum? I will let you know what I decide when I actually do it!

The plants whose roots I photographed inevitably got a certain amount of disturbance. The question is "Will it cause any long term problem"?

Well, no, it almost certainly won't. In fact a little bit of root disturbance often gives the plant a bit of a growth spurt. It is rather like the stimulation they get from being repotted. They should recover well and be ready to pot up to the next size pot in another month.



Super Special price now permanent

'African Violets for Everyone', the Book including the CD has now been reduced from \$28.50 to the permanently **discounted price** of only

\$21.00 (AU) (Packaging and postage is extra)

Special deals still available for bulk purchases. See website for details.

www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net

*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. Otherwise just keep checking back to the website: www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net. Remember, too, all this information **and more** is available in the book 'African Violets for Everyone' - available from the website.*

The Blues

Some time ago I wrote about the colour pink, how many different pinks there are and how they shade into red. To say nothing of bi-colours and multicolours. And then others that are shades in the same colour.

So OK. What about blue . . . or do I mean lavender . . . mauve, perhaps? Where does one finish and the other begin? It makes describing the colours of our violets rather difficult. One grower's "blue" can be another's "lavender" and so on.

With these colours there is the added problem that blue is somewhat difficult to photograph. However in these pictures the colour is as true to life as I can make it.

I know there are descriptions of the various hybrids, but sometimes it can be difficult to understand in context with the plants themselves.



We know that our hybrids have come from species like those on the left. So it is not surprising that blue and lavenders are quite common. What I really enjoy, though is the enormous variation in simple blue—how many are the different shades, and as I said

where does one finish and another begin?

Of course the picture is rather cloudy when you find someone who refers to colours totally differently from your own understanding.



This was clear to me when someone recently referred to flowers this colour, on the left, as mauve. I think of it as red. A slightly fuchsia tone of red, but red all the same. It so happens that the hybridiser's description agrees with me.



And, I can't help remembering when a fairly well-known gardening gentleman looked at the flower on the bottom left (Chiffon Print, a long time favourite of mine) and said something to the effect that it was the lilac one. Now that just isn't my appreciation of the colour at all! Pink, dear sir! Pink with a blue fantasy.



When to Pot Up

There are many ways that an African violet (or any other plant for that matter) will tell you that it is ready to repot.

- It may grow so large that the pot cannot stay upright
- In growing oversize it may be full of many crowns and be long overdue for a fix
- The roots may start growing out the drain holes
- The plant may lose colour, stop flowering and stop growing

There can be other causes for any of these symptoms, of course, but that is for another time.

What about the little plant that you just want to move up to increasingly larger pots to achieve a stunning result when it achieves maturity? How do you know when it is time to move that little plant to a larger pot? As with so much about African violets the story is all in the roots.

Here are a couple of examples, both of which were growing in 70 mm pots:

The first photograph shows a plant just at the right stage for repotting. The roots have fully invested the potting mix but have not become bunched up into a hard impenetrable mass. This one can be potted up into a larger pot with as little disturbance of the roots as possible. The roots will just keep growing out into the new mix and there should be no impact on the actual leaves.



The second photograph shows a plant in a similar size pot but this pot is a clear one. The clear pot allows the roots to be seen without slipping the plant out of the pot. You can clearly see that the plant has been too long in that pot. The roots are very much intertwined in the bottom of the pot. It will be necessary to tease them out a little before planting in the larger pot, so that the roots will grow freely and rapidly.



What size pot should they be potted into?

Not too much bigger, is the general rule, but for me it all depends on the variety and on the time of year.



Here is the range of pot sizes I use.

They are 50mm, 70mm, 80mm and 100 mm. I sometimes use other sizes for special purposes. In theory the young plants are moved progressively through those stages. In practice it can be a little different as I can happily skip a size if the plant is a strong growing one with a well developed root system, especially if it is a prime growing period such as we are entering now in late March.

The heat has abated and the violets are getting a grow on.

Both the illustrated plants have actually been moved up into 100 mm pots directly. They should have no trouble continuing to grow and will flower in a month or two.

A general note about repotting:

If you have changed potting mixes since the plant was last potted it is best to tease out the roots—unless the mix is exactly the same as before. If the texture or ingredients are very different, tease out some of the old mix to ease the transition for the plant.

Too Much Blue in This Issue?

Could be—so I am finishing with some other colours to redress the balance!

