



July 2019

The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

A free download from www.africanvioletsforeveryone.net

How important to you is flower size? Recently where we have all been amazed and entranced by the size of the flowers of some new European hybrids.

And, yet, I was just thinking many of the old faithful plants we have grown over many years also have really large flowers. And that is also the case for the flowers on African violets created by some of our local hybridisers. It is always so easy to forget the virtues of the things that we are accustomed to while applauding the new. Maybe a mistake, though.

Here is a plant of 'Matinee'. All the photos on this page are 'Matinee' and its flowers. It is described as "Semidouble pale pink large frilled star. Variegated, quilted, serrated." The hybridiser is Margaret Taylor.

In order to measure a flower accurately I removed it from the plant. First I posed it beside a 50c piece. The coin was quite dwarfed and I realised people in other countries would not realise what size an Australian 50c coin was. So I laid it along a tape measure. It easily made 3 inches. This isn't quite apparent in the photograph because the petal on the right is curving up even more than the other petals. Not too bad for size, though. And the plant produces plenty of them. I think it can make a permanent home here.

Makes it hard to decide what plants you really, really love, doesn't it? I need to think again!

Sorry I didn't have a metric measure handy at the time, but that is approximately 75 mm.



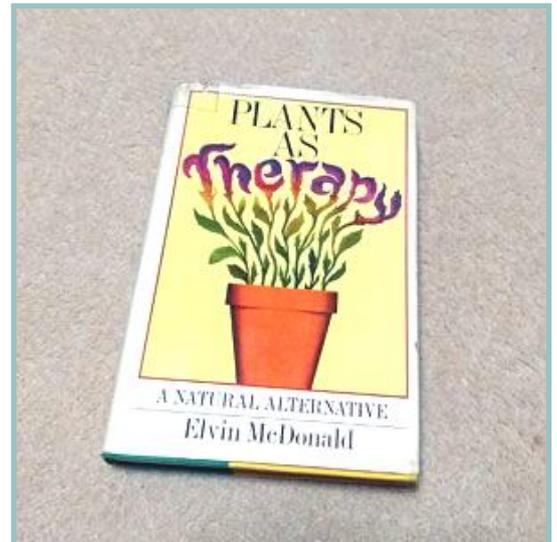
Plants as Therapy

I have been thinking a bit about the fact that so much of my life has been taken up by growing African Violets (and numerous other plants too, of course). By some people's estimates this has been time wasted that could have been employed doing something productive. And other people would be dismayed by the cost of the plants, potting mix, pots, electricity for lights and so on. How can I justify it?

Actually, I have decided that I don't have to. It justifies itself.

How is that?

In his introduction to his 1976 book 'Plants as Therapy', Elvin Macdonald says "Gardeners have always known that plants can provide emotional sustenance. For some two hundred years people concerned with mental health have recognized the therapeutic value of plants". The book has chapters dealing with subjects like stress, depression, anger, crises, creativity, confidence – all areas where growing plants can help.



And again an article in the New York Times, 9 September 1981 called "Plants as Therapy are More Popular.", quotes Miss Chambers, a horticultural therapist saying "Plants have an intrinsic value," Miss Chambers said. "It's not just teaching people how to grow and work with green growing things. Our training adds therapy skills. These two disciplines together are turning an old field into a new profession and it works. Even the medical profession recognizes the results, but there is a need now to get a scientific research base to understand why it works." You can read the whole article here: <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/10/garden/plants-as-therapy-are-more-popular.html>

I have also read a CNN article which is not now available unfortunately but which says "Studies have found that horticultural therapy supports recovery and improves mood, resulting in shorter stays for many populations, such as mental health facilities and hospitals".

And here's an item that relates more to our obsession with African violets: <https://www.healthline.com/health/importance-plants-home>. On this website it is claimed that plants in the home will: provide cleaner air, lower risk of illness, boost mood, enhance concentration and memory and promote healing in hospitals. Did you know your African violets can do all that? I hope you did.

An article in the Telegraph (UK) for 24 Feb 2019, reports Monty Don, English broadcaster and horticulturist, saying that "Gardening can do what medicine tries to mimic for mental health", as he spoke about his own struggles with depression. He speaks of his excitement for the future of research into gardening as treatment.

In his most recent book called "Down to Earth" (published by Dorling Kindersley Ltd, on 5 October 2017), he tells how gardening helped him recover from a stroke and his bouts of depression. He says ""You need nature more than she needs you. It is not an equal relationship. Serve her well and she will look after you. Abuse her and everyone loses."

And then I have a couple of personal memories to share:

There was the elderly lady I knew who loved her African violets and grew quite a few. She had several bouts of serious illness and even was badly injured in a car crash but always rose from her sick bed in record time so she could enjoy her plants. "They needed me" she said.

Legendary Australian Gesneriad hybridiser Charles Lawn said to me one time "No matter how I feel in the morning, I go out into the glasshouse and . . . I'm free". Couldn't say it better myself.

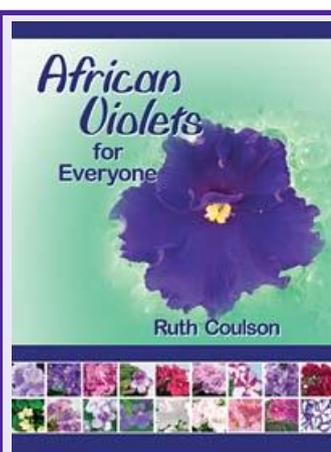
No, my friends, our African violet addiction is nothing to worry about. We are improving the health, longevity and general well-being of ourselves, our families and everyone around us. And probably saving heaps on medical and pharmaceutical costs!

Roots

Quite recently I bought a little toy that has been a great source of enjoyment, and of learning, too.

It is a magnifying lens that you clip onto a mobile phone or tablet. I bought it to help check the plants for thrips or mites. I haven't found any of those, so I photographed some roots instead. You think I'm fixated on roots? Guilty. . .

But just look at the root hairs! So important to the plant.



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

Variegated African Violets

I have been thinking quite a lot about violets with variegated foliage lately, at least partly by seeing photographs of the Best in Show at the recent African Violet Society of America Convention. The Best in Show was a plant of 'Buckeye Nostalgia' and it was grown by Wayne Geeslin. Not only that, he had numbers of other variegated violets that were just as mind-blowing.

The plants had plenty of flowers, but it is the leaves that really attracted me. It is difficult to grow variegation to the standard he has achieved with every leaf on the plant appearing to have the same amount of variegation. That is quite different from the way my own variegated plants appear at the moment.

This plant is featured on the cover of the African Violet Magazine for July-August 2019. That is the magazine put out by the African Violet Society of America. If you don't belong to the AVSA, consider joining, wherever in the world you are. I find it worth it just for the magazine.



I wrote about variegated African violets back in November 2016, so I don't intend to repeat a lot of the information in that issue of 'The African Violet Way'. I thought it would be useful to look at the reasons it is a real challenge to grow a plant the way that show winner was.

Variegation is a variable thing for most of us. The green leaf area of the plant can be greater or lesser. Sometimes a plant may have very little green chlorophyll and just cream or even pink leaves with a miniscule amount of green. These can be superficially and delicately attractive. But they are doomed.

The chlorophyll, green pigment in the leaves of all plants, allows the cells to absorb energy from the light so that growth can take place. It is a complicated process but all you and I need to know is that without chlorophyll the African violet cannot live. And an African violet without enough chlorophyll will likely not grow or flower well.

So what creates the variegation?

Variegation is genetically determined. The different types of variegation began as mutations that occurred in non-variegated plants. As the trait is genetic it can be carried down through generations by propagation.

Why do the plants change?

The answer most often lies in the temperature, which plays the biggest part. With lower temperatures or unsatisfactory pH the nitrogen in the fertiliser is less available to the plant and chlorophyll is only produced weakly or not at all. The reverse applies in hot temperatures when we find the leaves can become all green. An appropriate pH for the potting mix is slightly acid—6.5—6.8, 7 being neutral. An unbalanced fertiliser or a lack of magnesium are also possibilities but are not common with sorts of potting mixes and fertilisers mostly in use.

Here are my Golden Rules for growing variegated violets -

1. Do not do radical repotting of these plants in cooler temperatures, or when cooler temperatures are approaching. Repotting stimulates the growth and if it is too cold, the leaves may come through all white (or pink, tan, cream etc.). Certainly do not repot variegates when the temperature gets below about 15 degrees Celsius at night. The converse is true in a hot climate where it may be difficult to get variegation over the leaves in the heat. Leave any repotting until cooler times appear.
2. For the same reason do not set leaves of variegates to propagate in cool, or approaching cool temperatures. If you have a choice, that is.
3. You will know your own growing conditions the best, so you will know where the warmest and coolest spots are to grow the plants. What you need to do is to keep variegates as cool as possible in hot weather and as warm as possible in cool weather. Moving the plants seasonally is often the way to go.
4. Sometimes extra humidity as in terrarium conditions will help mitigate the effects of cool nights.
5. And lastly, something that applies at any time you are propagating variegated African violets by leaf. Try to use a leaf with a lot of green in it. As the variegation is genetic it should still come through in the plantlets, but propagation will be more successful with a greener leaf.
6. Should you have a plant with very little green in it, **do not** prune off the outside leaves if they are the only green ones. To have any hope of survival the plant must have some chlorophyll.

These rules might not be the same for you, I hasten to add. Everyone is dealing with different growing conditions and with different plants.

Effect of Light

When I started growing I was told that variegates did better with a little less light than all green plants. This was to help the variegation, but it never has seemed to me to have much effect.

Nitrogen

Some people try to regulate the variegation in their plants by applying or withholding nitrogen fertiliser.

What do you do if a leaf of a variegate has produced nothing but little white babies that just won't thrive?

If no action is taken sometimes the very weak pale plantlets will rot away in the heat of summer so waiting for something to happen isn't a good plan.

1. *You can water with a weak nitrogen fertiliser, and/or with an Epsom salts solution for added magnesium. This may help put some green in the leaves.*
2. *Keep it as warm as possible through the cool weather, allowing the mother leaf to do all the photosynthesis for them. Do not remove the mother leaf from these plantlets, or even trim it.*
3. *If the plantlets are still white, once the weather is warm enough – repot the whole clump into a slightly larger pot, disturbing the roots a little as you do so. This should stimulate the growth, and in the warmer temperatures the new growth should have more green in it. No absolute guarantee but this is the best method I know.*

This may well work, but I will confess I haven't had the patience to wait for it to do so.

Working with the temperature

You may be very fortunate and have fairly stable temperatures year round. Most of us are not so lucky. For some of us temperatures may just get very hot or very cold and there is little we can do to alter that. Budgets may not accommodate extra heating or cooling for the plants, so choose those variegated violets that suit your conditions best. Only your experience will show.

The types of variegation

There are three genuine types of variegated leaves, and the different kinds of variegation behave a little differently. It is as well to know how to identify them and how to care for the plants.

Tommie Lou Variegation

The most commonly seen, this typically occurs around the outside of the leaves, leaving the centre of the leaf green. Sometimes the variegation is so intense that it appears the entire leaf is variegated, but this is still Tommie Lou variegation.



Centre or Champion Variegation

In these plants it is always the centre leaves of the plant itself which are variegated, sometimes entirely coloured. The outer leaves may be plain green. They are also the most affected by temperature. The two plants in the photographs demonstrate this



Mosaic variegation

These plants give the appearance of leaves that are evenly variegated all over, but more careful examination will show that the variegation is usually more to the centre of the leaf and the margins remain green. Mosaic variegation is very little affected by the temperature.



Sometimes a plant may seem to have sported to variegation for you. This I call pseudo variegation. It rarely covers the whole plant—just some leaves or even half the plant, but it soon grows out and doesn't seem possible to propagate.

*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.*