



May 2020

The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

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I regret there has been no edition of “The African Violet Way” since July of 2019, but I have had personal difficulties in the interim. Unfortunately this newsletter was one of the things that had to be put aside. Of course I don’t want to give up my connection with African violets or other African violet growers, but in order to make it possible to continue, I made the decision to further cut the numbers of plants I grow so I can cope under my present circumstances.

I really should also be apologizing to my plants. Although I have had some family help I have not been able to follow through myself so most of the plants have had no proper attention since July. They have been dry as often as they have been watered. Nothing has been repotted, there has been little grooming, little fertilising and there was even a period of a couple of weeks of no light. However every misadventure is an opportunity for learning. And one thing I have certainly learned is that African violets are really capable of surviving surprisingly well. Of course there have been losses, but many will be fine with just some cutting back and repotting. The fact that some plants have died has made it easier to decide which stay and which go. If they look too bad they go—no question asked.

Although some plants didn’t make it through the dark times, there have been some surprises.

This ‘Kiwi Dazzler’ has proved itself to be one tough little plant. It is still in a 70 mm pot, the one into which it was planted in July of 2019. That is nine months ago. It was on a tray of 12 plantlets. Over the time the tray has often been empty of water/ fertiliser solution, and certainly hasn’t been cleaned out at all. When wilting dry they have often had plain water with no fertiliser. None of this is ideal!

Normally they would have been potted up long since, and would have been spread out to probably four or less to a tray. When the plants are in this small size pot I prefer not to let them flower, but to concentrate on a good root system and healthy foliage. “Normal” disappeared months ago, though.



I noticed some flowers on this plant recently and took it off the shelf, to find it didn't look too bad at all. It has been my dining table decoration now for around a week. The leaves had been somewhat distorted but have become flatter and a few more buds have opened.

OK. It isn't an ideal plant. But not bad for one that can be said to have done it all by itself!

Plenty of work needs to be done on it. Flowers are pretty scarce around here at the moment so I will let this go and enjoy it being its dazzling self until the flowers fade. Then I will have to remove a lot of leaves, all the flowers and buds, and when I take it out of its little pot I am sure I will find the roots are a hard knot and will need to be pruned considerably too. Depending on what is left, I will be able to repot it into a slightly larger pot, or maybe in fresh potting mix back into the same size pot.

I will take a series of photographs to show the steps I follow in renovating a sad plant of this type—for the next edition of “The African Violet Way”, I hope.

The Sad Bunch

When I was able to get down to my plants, I first of all took a representative few from the shelves and photographed them to show just how good healthy plants can deteriorate with no TLC.

Now I just have a heap of repotting to do and all should be well—eventually.

So what happens when an African violet is not cared for, and is left to become dry.

- Leaves become soft, wilted, wizened, papery, crisp—progressively from the outside.
- Root hairs dry out and die. Other roots follow. Too much water given at this point can cause rot because there are too few roots left to absorb it.
- Potting mix may become hardened and difficult to re-wet.
- Stress may cause the plant to make more side-shoots (suckers) than they usually would.
- Loss of outside leaves can result in a longish “neck” on the plant. This can only be fixed by major repotting.
- Eventually the plant cannot survive.

First of the plants I considered is this— ‘Star Turn’.

You can see that a lot of leaves have been lost. The photograph does not show it clearly but there is a neck below the leaves. The plant should have been much larger at this time. But it is trying. It has at least one very good leaf if I was intending to propagate, and I even see a bud there.

It would be possible to repot this plant and grow it on but I have another, so it has been discarded.



Here is 'Corroboree'. You may know it as a strong-growing plant. In this case it has been in this pot for nine months and is around 200mm across. The outside leaves are terminally wilted and will not pick up. They will soon begin to dehydrate or fall off.

It may yet be saved as the centre growth is healthy and even flowering. Prompt repotting is called for. It is usually so durable.



This specimen is 'Meditation'.

As you can see from the dried leaves around the bottom that a lot of growth has been lost. The plant should have been of greater diameter. And, the suckers! Well, it is a chimera, so I guess they won't go to waste.

Everything but the main crown should be removed. Probably there will be so long a neck that the whole root system should be removed too.



'Perisher Blue' is/was a lovely semi-miniature—until it was left to fend for itself.

Its response has been to grow just one sucker which now is just as big as the main crown. Outside leaves are damaged and deteriorating so it should be dealt with fairly soon.

My best plan will be to cut off the two crowns at the level of the potting mix and grow them separately.



Oops—too late.

This one is so far gone that it is virtually dead. I know there is a trace of green, but that is not worth worrying about.

The next resting place for this plant is the discard heap.



And yet, some plants are just so resilient. This is 'Red Delicious', a great favourite of mine.

It has dried up leaves, damaged leaves, a trace of powdery mildew and so on, but still is trying to put on a show. How valiant it is!

It should be fairly easy to revive. I will remove all flowers and leaves other than the top six. What it looks like then will indicate how I repot. It should be in flower again in the spring. I will be glad to see it since it is not a variety to lose.



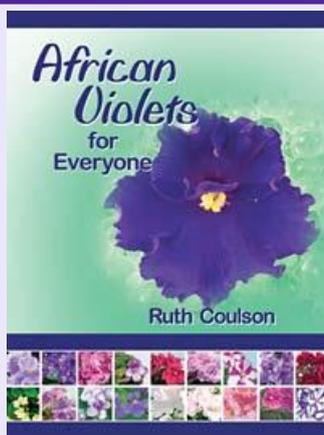
So, you see, these are just a sampling. Of course those that are virtually dead or not worth reviving are easily dealt with. Just discard. But everything else needs work. As I already said, I will try to take some photographs of the processes I go through as I repot.

In many it would be tempting to take a leaf and just discard the plant. And with some I probably will. But I don't want too many leaves planted because that means lots of repotting to do at a later time. I want to catch up and stay caught up!

Already I see improvement because I have discarded the really bad cases and been watering properly for a few weeks now. Also, I have removed a lot of dead flowers. That alone can make a collection seem a lot more interesting.

I look forward to a time, however far distant, when I might have shelves of healthy flowering plants once more. Hard work, but worth it.

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African Violets in Red

You will already be aware that African violets first came into cultivation in the late 19th Century. The original plants as collected in the wild, or grown from seed collected in the wild were the species plants. They all have flowers in the blue part of the spectrum – lavenders, purples etc plus white. Once they were in cultivation there was no stopping the African violet. We now have many thousands of cultivars.

But if the species were all in the blue part of the spectrum how come we now have all these other colours? Well, we are very lucky. African violets are very good at producing mutants – that is plants that grow from the originals but tend to differ genetically in some way that is capable of being carried on through the generations. A tendency to red flowers became obvious early in African violet culture. Indeed quite soon after they were introduced, a rubra and an alba were being offered. I imagine that the rubra was a rather bluish or ‘fuschia’ sort of red.

When I first seriously began collecting African violets the reds I had were all of this kind. I loved them, of course. But when the bright reds like you can see in the photographs on these pages became available I think we all fell in love with the colour.

And, of course the hybridisers obliged. We now have the most beautiful red flowered African violets in so many variations. Not just variations of the colour, but of everything else as well. Standard size plants, miniatures, trailers, variegated foliage, edged flowers, chimera, fantasy – there is no end.

The colour of the flowers of the red African violets (and of other colours too, to be truthful) varies quite a lot depending on the light under which you see them. Fluorescent light, coloured LEDs, incandescent light, daylight—all will be different. So the flowers here are as close to correct as I can make them. But of course your phone, tablet or computer may display them differently again.

I have not labelled the photographs accompanying this by variety, because it is the colour we are talking about not the individual plants. But I will tell you that these are all standard size rosette type plants. And all plants that I have grown or am growing.





Vale Pete White

The death yesterday of Pete White, half of the hybridising duo of Jays' series African violets, needs to be commemorated, and there can be no better way of doing it than by showing the photographs here of some of their most popular plants.

As is obvious from the photographs, they produced heavy flowering plants with great show potential. Clockwise from the top right they are: Jays' Icecastle, Jays' Just Pink, Jays' Flossy, Jays' Frosted Burgundy, Jays' Frosty Morn and Jays' Tammy.

