



HOUSEPLANTS DEPARTMENT

AFRICAN VIOLETS

By Dee Beckman

African violets are one of the few true flowering houseplants, while many other plants may be taken into the home after being brought into bloom in a greenhouse and probably never bloom again, the violet will bud and bloom indoors practically year around.



This Native of Africa is a very tolerant plant, which make it an easy non-demanding houseplant. This plant thrives on neglect and needs only a warm and bright light location and water when it wilts with dryness.

Violets come in a wide variety of colors and leaf forms that include tiny micro-miniatures that will grow in a shot glass. There are also variegated varieties with leaves that are streaked with white or yellow, and trailing varieties that hang over the edge of the pot. Unfortunately, they have not come up with scented varieties yet.

In the wild this plant is found in the foothills to about 7,000 feet in the Tropical Eastern African Mountains near Tanzania in partial shaded areas amongst the trees. African Violets thrive where the temperature is warm, 68 to 77 degrees F. with little night temperature fluctuation.

This plant was discovered in the late nineteenth century by Baron Walter von St Paul. It belongs to a large Gesneriaceae family that include achimenes, gloxinia and streptocarpus. In the 1920s interest in this plant came to California and new varieties made this plant very popular. In the 60s Hermann Holtkamp made the African Violet a household name.

African Violets don't generally die on people, but people kill their violets. The evidence indicates that over-watering is the major cause of premature death in all houseplants. African Violets are especially vulnerable because their water requirements are small.

Violets Have Four Basic Needs: Warmth, Bright light, Little water and Fertilizer.

TEMPERATURE

Keep warm above 65 degrees F. night temperature; it prefers 70 to 80 degrees F. if possible. Try to use only tepid or Luke warm water when watering. Since they don't like cold feet. Keep away from cold drafts especially doors that lead to outside.

LIGHT

Light is a vital ingredient. Plants need light in order to live; without it they will die. African Violets are particularly sensitive to the quality of light available and will only give of their best if the light intensity is to their liking. Violets require 2 to 4 hours of morning or afternoon sunlight. If they don't receive enough light they will not bloom. They will look like a healthy plant with dark green leaves but no flowers. Too much direct sun will give the appearance of reddish yellow leaves and spindly flowers. Just the right amount of sun will give nice large, compact, dark green leaves with lots of flower buds.

WATER

Top or bottom watering? There are people that claim that violets should always be watered from the top to avoid the accumulation of salts; others swear by bottom watering, alleging that top watering flushes out the plant's nutrients. Each side has a convincing case.

The truth is that either method will produce excellent results. What really matters is that the water is supplied only when the plant needs it, and that the soil in the pot is given a thorough soaking. If top watering is practiced, care must be taken to avoid getting water on the leaves or in the crown of the plant. Cold water splashed on the leaves may cause yellow/brown spots or white streaks on the leaves. If the crown becomes wet, dry it out quickly or it may start to rot. Warm water splashed on a leaf will cause no damage, but if sunrays hit the wet leaf it may cause sunburn. The safest way to water the plant is to use a watering can that has a long slender spout, which can be poked under the leaves, allowing the room temperature/lukewarm water to be poured directly on the soil. One drawback is if the soil is extremely dried out the water will not penetrate the soil and run right off. If so, add 1Tsp.

liquid dish detergent to about one gallon of water and submerge the pot and let sit in the warm water for a few minutes.

Bottom watering is certainly simpler and enables a really dry plant to be revived rapidly. Fill the kitchen sink to a depth of 2in with warm water and stand the thirsty violet in the water. Allow it to sit until it quits bubbling (about 10 minutes) then remove from the water, drain off excess water and return to its saucer or pot cover. This can be time consuming if you have a lot of plants. For this reason collectors water their plants via the saucers in which they stand or self-watering pots. These plants are not water loving plants and do not like to have cold wet feet and may become waterlogged and drown. The key is not to allow the plants to sit in water for an extended amount of time. Make sure the plant dries out completely between watering. Allowing the plant to wilt between watering will not hurt the plant but can cause premature bud or flower drop.

FEEDING

When your violet is vigorously growing and is using up its supplies of nutrients, feed the plant with an all-purpose 20-20-20 fertilizer, about every other watering. Its best to go half strength, especially if the soil is bone dry, water the plant first with clear water before it is fertilized.

HUMIDITY

In Tanzania not only is the temperature very warm, but, the moisture content of the air is high. Here in our dry arid homes especially in the winter we may need to increase the humidity by using a pebble tray or bunching the plants together. It must be pointed out that many people who have violets in their home find no need to give extra humidity. These plants are far more robust than we realize and grow in a perfectly satisfactory way standing in a dry saucer or pot-cover. This demonstrates clearly that high humidity is not vital to the life of the violet. Too much humidity and not enough airflow can cause powdery mildew. Spray with a fungicide or baking powder to remove this fungus.