



African Violets Can Bloom All Year Long

By Joan Bonnette, Master Gardener,
University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension, Hillsborough County

African Violets can bloom all year long. They make great houseplants, with their cheerful flowers brightening up a windowsill even in the dead of winter. Since their discovery over one hundred years ago, they have become very popular.

The story begins in the mountain ranges of eastern Africa, where Tanzania is today. While walking with his fiancée on his plantation in Africa, Baron Walter von Saint Paul found some pretty flowers growing near a small stream. The Baron picked a bouquet of these blooms for his bride to be.

Knowing his father's love of gardening, the Baron collected some seeds from these small purple flowers. He sent them to his father in Germany. Ulrich von Saint Paul grew plants from the seeds and gave some to the director of the Botanical Gardens in Herrenhausen, Germany.

Hermann Wentland, the head of the Botanical Gardens gave these new plants the genus name *Saintpaulia*. We know them by another name, African violet. From their romantic discovery in 1892, to today they have become one of the most popular houseplants.

Their popularity didn't just happen overnight. Through trial and error, plantsmen learned how to properly grow this new plant. In 1927 the Armacost and Royston Nursery in Los Angeles bought some violet seeds. Eight years later this nursery offered ten varieties of *Saintpaulia* for sale. This started the world's love affair with these plants.

Would you like to grow African violets? Don't believe the old wives' tale; they really can be easy to grow. Knowing a few basics on their care will reward you with a houseplant that will delight you with its flowers.

Let's talk about watering and fertilizing. African violets prefer lukewarm water. They originally come from an area 100 miles south of the Equator, so they generally don't like cold temperatures. They thrive in temperatures between 60 and 70 degrees F.

They grow best with a water-soluble violet fertilizer used weekly at one- quarter the recommended strength. Try to avoid brands that contain Urea for the nitrogen. This will be listed on the Guaranteed Analysis section of the label. Urea can cause yellow leaves and less flowering.

Do you have plants that don't flower anymore? This could be caused by improper amounts of light. African violets love filtered light, not direct sunlight. They do well growing in a north or east window throughout the year. In the winter the plants will grow happily in a south or east window, but in summer the sun can be too strong in these locations. You can also grow African violets under lights, but they need to have eight hours of darkness a day.

Although you can buy pre-packaged violet soil mixes, these soils tend to be too heavy for the plants. Try mixing your own: two parts milled sphagnum peat moss and one part perlite works well. This medium stays airy even when wet, giving the roots a porous place in which to grow. If you already have a bag of commercial soil, don't throw it out. Just lighten the mix by adding one part perlite to two parts of the soil.

African violets love to be root bound. They can flower profusely in smaller pots about four inches deep and one- third the size of the plant's leaf span. In other words, if the plant measures nine inches across, put it in a pot three inches in diameter. When African violet roots hit the sides of the pot the plant tends to put out more blooms.

To keep your plants looking good, groom them when you water. Take off any spent blooms and dead leaves. A small artist's brush works well for dusting the leaves and removing any soil particles.

As your violets get older, the lower row of leaves usually dies off. Removing the dead leaves tends to make the plant look as if it has a neck. When this happens, it is time to repot. Take the plant out of the container and gently brush off as much soil as possible from the root ball. Take off any old or yellow leaves. Trim off part of the lower roots so the plant will fit right back into the same container. Scrub the pot well to get rid of any fertilizer residue. Add fresh potting soil and position the violet so that the lower leaves are even with the top of the pot.

African violets are very easy to propagate. All you need to grow a new plant is a leaf. Choose a full-sized leaf and cut it off at an angle. Make sure the stem is one- and-one-half to two inches long. Place this leaf cutting in a small jar of water and put in a bright location with no direct sun. It will take about a month for the leaf to form roots. Then you can pot it in a container with drainage holes.

Another way to propagate the cutting is to place it directly in a small pot filled with a mixture of half potting soil and half perlite. Water the soil and let it drain well. Then put the potted plant into a clear plastic bag, punch several smallish holes in the bag and seal. This will take the same amount of time to root-- a month-- and another month for new leaves to develop.

Today thousands of African Violet varieties are available. They come in many different colors and shapes. African violets are inexpensive to buy and are even available at grocery stores. The Web site of the African Violet Society of America (avsa.org) lists many sources for obtaining plants and provides lots of information to help you with any questions. Try your luck; these plants will reward you with flowers all year long.

If you would like more information on anything mentioned here please feel free to visit our web site at www.ceinfo.unh.edu or call UNH Cooperative Extension's Family, Home & Garden Center's Info-line (tollfree) at 1-877-398-4769. Trained volunteers are available to answer your questions Monday through Friday 9:00am to 2:00 p.m.

UNH Cooperative Extension programs and policies are consistent with pertinent Federal and State Laws and regulations on non-discrimination regarding race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, veteran status, or marital status. UNH, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, and New Hampshire counties cooperating. No person shall be denied the opportunity to participate in this program because of an inability to pay. Persons with disabilities who require an accommodation in order to participate should contact UNH Cooperative Extension.