

Amy's Top 10 Tips for Growing Great African Violets

by Amy Cash-Allison

Actually, the very first tip I have for new African violet hobbyists is to just forget all those stories you've heard about how difficult it is to grow these houseplants. You don't need a degree in biology, and you don't even need an expert green thumb, either. When speaking with growers from all over the country, I've realized that most people simply don't understand the basic requirements of African violets. Once you've learned them, the rest is a piece of cake. Most of their needs can be met in an average home environment with supplies that are easy to come by. Here, I share with you my top tips for success with African violets.

#1.

Start with the right **soil**! African violets need a soil that is very light and porous and will not compact when watered. Most commercial potting mixes are too heavy to be considered ideal. If this is all you have, add in equal amounts of perlite and sphagnum peat moss to the mix, until you have a light, airy consistency. Many successful growers buy their soil from mail order companies, and although these mixes are better suited, they aren't a necessity! A very light seed starting mix is also something useful to try and can be readily purchased in spring at most nurseries and even large stores.

#2.

Use small, plastic **pots**! Always be sure to use pots with drainage holes. African violets don't bloom unless their roots are a little crowded, so never pot your violet in a huge pot. Measure the diameter of your plant from its outermost leaves and divide by 3. This is the diameter of the pot you should use for your plant. Plant the violet so that the crown, or growing center is just above the surface of the soil. Repotting into a larger pot probably won't be necessary for at least 6 or more months. You can replenish the soil or repot your violet within that time if necessary, but use the same size pot. Using plastic pots will help ensure the plant is getting a consistent amount of moisture. Terra cotta pots tend to dry out the soil mix too fast, can get slippery when wet, and are usually very heavy. If you like the look of terra cotta best, simply slip your plastic pot into the terra cotta pot!

#3.

Improper **watering** is the #1 killer of African violets, but it still isn't rocket science! Keep your violet evenly moist, but not wet! They prefer consistent, even moisture, but not heavy wetness. They will not do well if they fluctuate between drought and drowning, so avoid flooding them or allowing them to dry to the point of wilt. A violet will wilt if it is too wet OR too dry, so never water a wilted violet until you have first confirmed that the soil itself is dry to the touch.

If it is too wet, stand the pot on paper towels until it soaks up some of the excess water and avoid watering again until the top of the soil is dry. (Remember, just because the top of the soil is dry doesn't mean the entire root ball is dry, so water sparingly if you are unsure.)

If the entire pot of soil is very, very dry and the plant is wilted, avoid the temptation to flood the plant or use any fertilizers, as this will lead to shock and death. When violets dry out too much or for too long, the tiny feeder roots die, limiting the plant's ability to use new water. In this case, add only a very small drizzle of water on the surface of the soil and wait 24 hours to add another drizzle. Do this for a few days, and the plant should begin to perk up. Resume regular, light watering after the 4th day if the plant seems to have recovered from wilt. Wait another month before using fertilizer.

You can also water your violet by setting the pot in a saucer of water, but remove it promptly after the

top of the soil is moistened. If your plant is in natural sunlight, avoid letting water droplets stand on the leaves. Water on the leaves will not kill your violet, but can mar them. If a lot of water sits in the center (the crown) of a violet, over time, this will rot the crown and potentially kill the plant. If you happen to spill some water on your violet's leaves, simply soak it up with a paper towel.

#4.

Give your plant strong, indirect **light**. African violets grow very well under fluorescent lights, but a good west or south-facing window will also work well if they have a little shading from a tree or from a sheer curtain. Avoid growing violets in hot, directly lit windows. Your violet will begin leaning and growing toward the window, so you will need to rotate it regularly to keep its natural shape.

Watch your plant for signs of its happiness. Bunchy, dark foliage indicates too much light. Pale leaves with long, weak stems means the plant needs stronger light. A plant that refuses to bloom even with other good care typically is not receiving enough light

#5.

Feed your violets! African violets need food to grow and bloom, so use an all purpose fertilizer (or one marketed specially for African violets) and dilute it down a little more than the package directions indicate. Keep that extra milk jug and mix up your violet water ahead of time. It will always be there when you need it, and your violet will thank you! Be sure to give your violet a break from fertilizing every month or so. If you bottom-water your plants in saucers, once a month run a stream of unfertilized water through the pot to rinse out fertilizer salts.

#6.

Keep your plants **clean**! Unsightly leaves, old flower stalks and dust or pet hair can all have a negative impact on how well your plant grows and blooms. Dust will limit the amount of light the plant is able to utilize for growth. Old, pale, or discolored leaves can easily be snapped off at their base when they become unsightly.

Old flower stalks are unattractive and can be easily pulled out when dried. Once a month, or as needed, use a damp paper towel to gently wipe the leaves clean of dust and pet hair.

Another thing you might notice on violets are small new plants that form near the main stem. They can ruin a beautiful, symmetrical plant when left to mature. These are called suckers, and if they are left on the plant, they will use all the energy to grow instead of for flower production. When plucked carefully off (or pried off with a knitting needle,) at their base and intact, you can put it in soil to grow a brand new clone of your violet plant!

#7.

Give them some **humidity**! African violets don't like to be kept in dry air, and their flower buds may turn brown and die if the humidity is too low. Also, leaf edges can brown and die as well. For this reason, many people find success in keeping violets in bathrooms or kitchens, where there is naturally more moisture in the air. Enclosing baby plants or ones recovering inside large, zippered baggies will speed up their growth and recovery process. Another way to increase humidity is to use plain warm water in a misting bottle, once every couple days or as needed. The mist should be fine enough so that you can barely see it on the leaves. You can also put saucers of water around your plants, or simply set the pot on a bed of damp stones.

#8.

Touch and inspect them regularly! It's an old wives' tale that African violets don't like to be handled. They relish it! Pick them up at least once a week, look at how they're growing and inspect them for any signs of damage or pests. Don't be afraid to reposition wayward leaves or fix leaves that are bending or curling. An old cosmetic brush works wonders for quick cleaning touch-ups.

#9.

Repot your violet! African violets benefit from regular repotting. Fresh soil provides new nutrients, and a light trim of roots will keep your plant vigorous for another year. If the plant's main stem has become bare and rough, a very light scraping with a dull knife is all that is needed to remove nubs and rejuvenate your plant. If the "neck" of the stem is an inch long, remove about an equal amount of roots and repot the plant low enough so that the crown is just above the surface of the soil. Water it lightly after repotting and watch for any signs of transplant shock. If the plant wilts within the first day, drain any excess water and lightly cover it with plastic film until it firms up again.

#10.

Grow and **share** new baby plants with your friends! Even kids love the magic of it. Simply pluck off a healthy green leaf, trim the stem to about an inch and bury about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch of the stem tip in light porous and damp soil. Gently fill in around the stem with soil and put the entire pot in a zippered baggie. Give it warm conditions in moderate, indirect lighting and wait for baby plants to emerge from the soil in about 6 weeks. You can also put your leaf into a small-mouthed vase or jar of water on your windowsill. It is fun to watch the roots and babies develop! When the babies are big enough to handle, separate them and plant them into their own pots. Now you have plants to share with your friends.