

African Violet, a Favorite Houseplant

By Susan Camp

Cats like to eat houseplants. We had Bilbo, who devoured the Christmas cactus every year and one Christmas, a Poinsettia leaf, necessitating a trip to the emergency vet clinic. Sophie Bean regularly snacked on our venerable ficus, but it survived her pruning and has thrived for 27 years. Roy enjoyed munching on an ancient clerodendron, but the worst plant destroyer is M Shaddow, who joined our household in 2013, and within three months, systematically destroyed five African violets that I had nurtured and protected since 2004.

The African violet (*Saintpaulia* spp.) was discovered in Tanganyika (Tanzania) by Baron von Saint Paul, Governor-General of German East Africa, and sent to Europe in 1892, where it soon developed popularity as a houseplant. The pretty African violet, with its white, purple, blue, or pink flowers and fuzzy, dark green leaves, is not a true violet, but belongs to the Gesneriad family, along with gloxinia and lipstick plant. Most of the hundreds of cultivars on the market today have been hybridized from the two original species, *S. ionantha* and *S. confusa*.

African violets grow well in the household environment, although they require a little extra attention and care to show off their succulent leaves and fleshy, candy-colored blossoms. African violets grow best in a north or east location, requiring 1000 foot-candles of light for 8 to 12 hours each day. Too little light will decrease flowering and cause leaves to thin and darken. Pale or yellowish-green leaves occur with excessive light. In the absence of sufficient natural light, fluorescent light at 600 foot-candles for 12 to 16 hours each day will foster healthy leaves and blooms. African violets should not be exposed to bright sunlight.

The most common cause of African violet demise is overwatering. Plants should be watered when the soil feels dry to the touch, from either the top or the bottom. Both methods have advantages and disadvantages. Top-watering can cause spotting or yellowing of the leaves if the water is too cool, so always use room temperature or tepid water. Watering from the bottom can encourage root rot and cause fertilizer salts to rise to the surface of the soil. The salts form a crust on the rim of the pot, which, besides being unsightly, can cause petiole (leaf stem) rot if stems touch the crust. Waxing the pot rim prevents a crust from forming.

The appropriate soil mixture is crucial to the survival of African violets. Specially mixed African violet potting mix is available at garden centers, or you can prepare your own from equal parts of sterile soil, perlite, and sphagnum moss. Equal parts of peat moss, perlite, and vermiculite also work well. Soil pH should be slightly acidic, about 6.0 to 6.5. Commercial water-soluble fertilizers manufactured specifically for African violets are available. Fertilizer is best applied by watering from the top and allowing the water-fertilizer mixture to seep through the plant to the tray below. Discard any excess water to prevent burning the roots with fertilizer chemicals.

Numerous articles on specific aspects of African violet care are available from the African Violet Society of America, including information on propagation and grooming. General information on African violet culture is found in the Virginia Cooperative Education (VCE) Publications and Educational Resources “African Violets”, Purdue University Extension Service HO-10-W “African Violet Care”, University of Florida Publication #ENH17 “African Violets”, and the Missouri Botanical Garden William T. Kemper Center for Home Gardening article “African Violets.”

I will have to dream about raising African violets until I find a safe, cat-free space in which to grow them. By the way, African violets are non-toxic to curious cats, dogs, and horses, according to the ASPCA Toxic and Non-Toxic Plants page. This information should offer some comfort to parents of curious cats that enjoy the taste of this lovely houseplant.

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