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AFRICAN VIOLET CULTURE

by Wesley P. Judkins

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The African violet (Saintpaulia ionantha) was discovered about 1890 in Eastern South Africa. Seeds were sent to England where it soon became popular as a potted plant. The African violet is not a true violet, but is a member of the Gresneria family, to which also belongs the velvet-leaved Gloxinia. At least 200 varieties have been named.

The classification of the several hundred varieties and strains of African violets is still being developed. Detailed information on this subject may be secured from the African Violet Society of America, Inc. The principal characteristics usually considered in classifying African violets in a flower show are: (1) whether flowers are single or double, (2) color of petals including white and shades of pink, blue, purple and bicolors, (3) variegated leaf color, and (4) miniatures.

Cultural Considerations

African violets grow well in the warm atmosphere of the average home. They need light from an east window to promote flowering. Light from a north window may be inadequate. Insufficient light will also cause the leaves to be thin and to develop long petioles. Excessive light hardens the leaves and causes them to develop a faded yellow-green color. If located in a west window thin curtains will be necessary to filter the hot afternoon sun. African violets grow best with a daytime temperature between 70 and 75 ^{o}F and a night temperature of not less than 60 ^{o}F.

African violets are propagated by the division of mature plants or by leaf cuttings. The plant should be potted in a high humus soil mixture with the crown about even with the top of the pot. The soil should slope down at the edge to about 1/2 inch below the rim. This insures good drainage of water from the crown and reduces the possibility of rot. Lime should be added to the soil mixture if needed to give a pH of 6.5 to 7.0. Fertilize every week or two using a soluble house-plant fertilizer which may be obtained from your florist or garden center.

The soil should be kept continually moist but not wet. Setting the pot on moist sand is an ideal procedure to provide water from the bottom, as well as humidity for the air around the plant. Water may be applied from the top when necessary but always use warm water. Cold water will reduce the vigor of the plant and may cause crown rot, and ring spot on the leaves. An occasional syringing of the foliage with water at room temperature will help maintain clean attractive foliage.

African violets should be repotted once a year. Thin out dense multiple crowns to encourage flower bud formation. Remove excess foliage by pulling sideways, which will allow leaves to break off with no stub remaining to cause rot. The potted plants may be plunged in soil outdoors during the summer in a partially shaded location where they are protected from driving rains. Regular thorough soaking of the soil is necessary to promote healthy growth and flowering.

Miniature African Violets

The true miniature African violet has only been available for about ten years. This is another example of the success of plant breeders in providing new and interesting species for home gardeners. These unique violets are usually more symmetrical than the large varieties, with an even, round pattern of leaves, and many blooms.

The first miniatures were called violettes or tea cup plants, and usually were placed in a novelty class when exhibited at flower shows. They are now becoming more widely grown and deserve special recognition as a house plant, or when displayed at a show.

Now there are also semi-miniatures. The leaves and flowers are somewhat larger than the miniatures. Mature plants may become eight inches in diameter. They grow best in a three inch pot.

The culture of miniature African violets is similar to that for the standard sizes. Because of the small pots in which they grow, they need water more frequently than other house plants. Be sure to inspect them daily and add water as needed.

Use a high-humus soil mixture. With the small quantity available in a two or three inch pot you may need to replant your miniature violets somewhat more frequently than your other house plants. Feed them with any standard African violet fertilizer dissolved in water as instructed on the package. Always apply water at room temperature.

The miniature African violets seem to grow better with more light than the standard varieties. They respond better to daylight than to fluorescent tubes. They grow very well on a windowsill, but should not be exposed to a bright hot sun.

Propagate the miniature violets by leaf cuttings. Roots will develop in damp vermiculite in about two weeks, and new leaves will appear in about six weeks. When the young plants are one or two inches tall they may be set in one inch thumb pots, or directly into the two inch permanent container. Be sure to provide good drainage in the bottom of the pot.

Miniature African violets are available in a wide variety of flower colors including light and dark tones of violet, blue, or pink, as well as white and bicolor. Various leaf forms are also available including plain, scalloped, ruffled, and variegated.

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