

From:



All About African Violets

© Copyright 2006 Gardening-Guides.com

Saintpaulis: A Little Plant With Big Beginnings

The African violet originated in the warm and dry climate of mountainous East Africa. In the wild, the African violet grows from 50 up to 300 feet tall.

A member of the large gesneriad family of tropical and subtropical plants, the African violet's relatives include Gloxinias, Streptocarpus and Ramondas. In fact, the African violet isn't a true violet at all! True violets are in the family Violaceae and the genus *Viola*. Deep-rooted plants with large to small heart shaped leaves and varying degrees of hairiness, true violets thrive in a variety of climates and are found worldwide growing outdoors in either full sun or partial shade.

Different from those cultivated in container gardeners, wild African violets tolerate a fair amount of sunshine but prefer shady spots for optimum growth. The African violet is a shallow rooted plant with fleshy, hairy leaves. Since it is a sub-tropical plant, the African violet is typically not hardy over winter and, especially in temperate areas, is grown only as a houseplant.

Adalbert Emil Walter Redliffe le Tonnevy Von St Paul-Illaire is credited with discovering the African violet in 1892 and its genus, *Saintpaulis*, is named for him. The first African violet species, *Saintpaulis ionantha* (violet-like), bears small flowers that are similar to the true violet in color.

The African violet is a favorite plant of indoor gardeners all over the world. Fleshy leaves that are soft with fine hairs form a symmetry that is crowned with a halo of flowers. The African violet grows in one of two ways. Plants grow either by forming trailers or in a symmetrical rosette. Of the two types, the rosette continues to be the most popular form of African violet for container gardening.

Flowers of the African violet may be single or double blossom clusters that sprout and are framed by a rosette of green to dark green foliage. Through the years, careful cultivation and breeding have produced 20 recognized hybrids in a color span that includes white, pink, violet, purple and bi-colored flowers as well as the familiar blue.



Plants with bicolor flowers have edges in a contrasting color to the main flower. In addition to the rainbow of flower colors, leaf bottoms may also be colored with a reddish tint.

When purchasing an African violet, you can tell if the plant is healthy by its flowers, which should be bright and distinctively colored. Healthy African violets bloom continuously throughout their lifetime. The African violet is one of the most widely grown houseplants on the planet. Although the easiest way to propagate your *Saintpaulis* is through leaf cuttings, the African violet flowers are actually the reproductive organs of the plant and are equipped with all the parts needed for propagation.

The African Violet Is an Easy Start to an Indoor Garden

The African violet is one of the easiest houseplants you can grow. While there are dozens of expensive preparations on the market, the essentials to growing African violets are potting mixture, bright indirect light, air circulation, water and a fertilizer and of course an African violet pot. Aside from the pot, there is little you have to purchase to grow continuous blooming, healthy African violets.

Even the novice can enjoy true success with the African violet. With just a little bit of know how, taking care of African Violets is easy. In fact, they do best when left alone except for watering, propagating, and repotting. Of course, in a standard four-inch pot, the African violet won't reach 300 or even 50 feet in height, but given minimal care, the African violet is happy in any sunny spot in your home. Starting the African Violet

A three-inch flowerpot is big enough for any young African violet. African violets are one of the easiest houseplants to grow and have a tendency to bloom wherever you plant them with little regard for the flowerpot! The most important considerations in growing African violets are light, temperature, circulation, soil, and water.

1. Light

In the wild, although the African violet needs a good amount of sunlight, it prefers the diffused light of a shady area in contrast to direct sunlight. Grown as a houseplant, insufficient light is the most frequent cause of failure to flower.

African violets are at their best when placed in either an east or west window. Be careful to place your African violet *near* the sunshine and not directly in it. Although African violets like light and warmth, exposure to direct sunlight can cause them to dry out too quickly and burn.

African violets need 10 to 14 hours of bright, *indirect* light, which indoor gardeners often supplement with fluorescent lighting. If you have a light meter, the African violet's requirement for optimum bloom is about 1,000 foot-candles.

2. If You Are Comfortable, So Is Your African Violet

African Violets acclimate easily to normal home temperatures. The most desirable temperatures for African Violets are a range from 60F at night to 85F during the daytime. Although they prefer daytime temps from 75F to 80F, when placed near a sunny window, they'll get enough extra heat to keep them happy. Your African violet will easily adapt to a slight normal dip in temperature during nighttime hours.

3. Give Your African Violet Breathing Room

Although your African violet breathes through its roots, you still need to take care not to crowd it. Make sure to keep some space between each of your plants. Another consideration about air circulation is to keep your Saintpaulis out of a draft. Although African violets adapt well to indoor climate control, they don't tolerate sudden fluctuations in temperatures.

A porous soil also helps in providing your plants with good air circulation, another critical factor in keeping them healthy.

4. Potting Mixture

In the wild, the African violet sends its shallow roots into the decaying organic matter caught in rock crevices and fissures. This is probably where our container gardens of African violets inherit a preference for being pot bound and their need for well-drained, light porous soil.

African violet soil should be very porous. Water should pass through it quickly, since soil that holds water can drown your Saintpaulis. (see *Watering Your African Violets*)

Regular potting soil has too many nutrients and is too dense to provide your Saintpaulis with either the circulation or drainage it needs to thrive. African violet potting mixture is available from most plant supply stores and garden centers. However, you can make an inexpensive African violet potting soil using one of several different "recipes". Before you begin planting, pasteurize your mixture by baking it for 30 minutes at 180° to 200° Fahrenheit to destroy any pathogens or pests.

If you plant your African violet in a well-drained pot with the proper African violet potting mix, you eliminate the need to put gravel in the bottom of the pot for drainage.

Traditional African Violet Potting Mix

- Two parts loam
- One part leaf mold or peat
- One part sand or perlite

Organic African Violet Potting Mix

- ½ well-composted garden soil
- ½ vermiculite or peat moss

Pasteurized Soil-less African Violet Potting Mix

- Three parts sphagnum moss
- Two parts vermiculite
- One part perlite

5. Proper Watering – Avoid the Shrinking Violet

Keep newly planted African violets moist until they become established. After that, keep in mind that the African violet is one of the easiest plants to "kill with kindness" and over-watering is the biggest killer of African violets.

To keep soil evenly moist, you may want to use a *wick system*. Place one end of the wick in the bottom of the pot before planting and the other end of the wick into a water reservoir either under your plant or along side it. A wick system provides your plant with a continuous water supply yet keeps the soil from becoming saturated. If you choose to hand water, use only tepid water and do it only when the soil is dry to your touch.

African Violet Care

Over watering – the number one killer of African violets

Although African violets do like evenly moist soil, letting the soil become waterlogged is certain death for the Saintpaulias. Overly saturated soil takes up the air-space African violets need to thrive. Since like many plants, the African violet both breaths and drinks through its roots, roots left standing in water deprive the plant of air and the Saintpaulias drowns.

There is some disagreement on how to water an African violet. Some growers prefer watering from the top. When watering African violets from above, take special care to keep leaves dry. Water left standing on leaves results in dark spots and rings that are unattractive and shorten the lifespan of the leaf. Many growers prefer to let the plant drink from a saucer or attached plant tray. Still, another method of watering is the *wick system*. Wick systems and two-part pots give your plants the water they need without leaving them with wet feet or splashing leaves with water.

All three types of watering are admissible as long as you don't get water on the leaves of the plant and water when the soil is about 50% dry or feels dry to your touch.

Don't use soft water. Tepid tap water or bottled water works fine. Although some African violet growers use distilled water, along with contaminants like chlorine, distilled water is also devoid of minerals and other nutrients that help your African violet grow.

If you use tap water, let it sit overnight so that it's room temperature at watering time. In addition, letting water sit helps to evaporate fluoride and chlorine, two of the harmful chemicals your African violet doesn't need.

Feeding Your African Violet

Over-fertilizing your African violet can result in as much harm as over-watering your plant. Over-fertilizing can cause leaves to become brittle and crack; it may also produce lesions on leaves and stems and it can curtail your African violet's ability to absorb beneficial elements, which results in wilting, leaf tip burning, and a decrease in bloom.

African violets like to be pot-bound. The less you have to replant them, the happier they are. However, in container gardening, nutrients are depleted quickly and need to be replenished either by repotting with fresh, nutrient rich potting mixture or by adding nourishment (*fertilizer*) to the pot.

Use only a fertilizer specifically formulated for African violets. The Saintpaulias requires certain trace elements which aren't available with an all purpose food, as well as a soil acidifier. African violet food takes care of these needs. A good African violet food is balanced with equal amounts of the primary nutrients, *nitrogen (N)*, *phosphorus (P)* and *potassium (K)*, usually in a 10-10-10 formula. Your African violet food should also be 100% water-soluble so that your plant can absorb the fertilizer's beneficial elements.



However, be sure that your African violet food won't prove toxic to your Saintpaulias. Although labeled for African violets, many fertilizers contain impurities that are harmful to the Saintpaulias. One component often found in fertilizers is urea, which is a source of nitrogen. Although it's cheaper than other sources of nitrogen, urea causes root burn on African violets, which reduces your plants ability to absorb water and beneficial nutrients.

Propagating and Repotting African Violets

African Violet Overflow is a Good Thing!

Among its other peculiarities, the African violet is content to live in a pot full of its own roots and prefers being root bound to frequent repotting. Because African violets prefer to be root bound, the optimal time to replant is when your plants overflow their pots.

Any disturbance is too much for the Saintpaulias. This lovely plant is the Greta Garbo of houseplants— to paraphrase, "It wants to be left alone". If you're repotting them more than once a year, you're probably guilty of over-kill. Once they find a spot they like, they don't like to be moved.

Experienced growers know that a good time to repot the Saintpaulias is when it overflows its container and quickly dries out between watering times. A sure way to kill an African violet is to over-water, so if your plant seems to be drying too quickly, consider repotting rather than watering more or more often.

Often, the reason for low bloom is that the pot is too big for the African violet. In fact, the Saintpaulias blooms best when it is slightly root bound. When you do repot, make sure to move up no more than two sizes at a time.

When it is time to repot, remove all crowns from your African violet except for the central one. Also, trim leaves from the plant, leaving a circle of leaves around the crown. Use a paring knife to scrape through the brown plant matter on the neck of your plant. When you see green, break off half the root and set your pruned African Violet into the pot, placing the crown just above the surface. Press the mixture firmly around the crown and water your plant well.

Propagate Your African Violets by Leaf or Seed

Whether your plant grows as a trailer or is the more common rosette type of African violet, you can easily propagate it by leaf cutting. Cleanly sever a leaf preserving about 1 ½ inches of stem. After dusting it with root powder, plant it about an inch deep in African Violet starting mix. Until new leaves begin to form, cover your new plant with a plastic bag to preserve the humidity.

Although African violets are easy to propagate from leaf cuttings, for a real adventure in African violet growing, try starting them from seeds.

The fun of growing African violets from flower seeds is that you never know what you'll get, since plants grown from seeds seldom have the characteristics of their parent. Although your seedling's foliage may be similar or the same as that of its parent, its flowers most probably will differ in color and type! Your purple violet may spawn children that bloom with an entirely different color and shape of flower!

Your first time in growing African violet flower seeds, you may want to purchase them from an experienced grower. However, if you've successfully grown Saintpaulias from seed, you may want to try pollinating your own plants to produce African violet flower seed. The flower is the reproductive organ of the Saintpaulias and contains all the parts it needs to self-seed. However, experienced hybridizers often pollinate their plants to be successful in producing new seedlings.

Patience is more of a necessity than a virtue when growing African violets from seed. Seedlings may take up to three months to emerge and it may take from five to seven months before you see the first flower blossom. Many growers suggest that you plant only half a package of seed at a time. The seeds are small and produce very small offspring, so working with your young plants requires a steady hand as well as a good measure of patience.

Comparing African Violet Pots

Although African violets grow in just about any kind of container that has adequate drainage, the type of care you intend to provide makes a difference in the style of flowerpot you choose, especially at watering time.

Many African violet pots are as pretty as the flowers that grow inside them. The three most common types of flowerpots for African violets are the unglazed terra cotta (clay) pots, cheap plastic pots with attached saucers, and self-watering pots.

Although not high fashion, the red terra cotta pot adds a classic look to both indoor and outdoor gardening.



Because unglazed terra cotta flower pots are very porous they're great for giving plants a good soak, letting water through the pot into the soil or potting mixture. After watering, terra cotta easily sheds excess water to provide quick evaporation.

The disadvantages in using terra cotta pots for your African violets are that 1) you may need to water more frequently because of too quick evaporation, 2) pots need to be set on some type of saucer to catch excess water, and 3) pores in terra cotta pots are good hiding places for mites, bacteria and other pathogens.

Pots with attached saucers are also good choices for African violets.



Drainage holes at the bottom give you the choice of watering either from the top or letting the plant drink from the filled saucer. Although these types of pots are usually made out of some kind of plastic, you may find them in other materials as well.

The disadvantages to using plastic pots with attached saucers are 1) you need to be more attentive at watering time, keeping an eye on the saucer and refilling it until your Saintpaulias gets a good drink and 2) you must be very careful after watering to drain any excess water from the saucer, doing a final check 30 minutes to an hour after watering.

It just makes sense that America's most loved indoor plant also has a special pot.

The traditional two-piece ceramic pot, the oyama pot and the dandy pot are three common types of African violet self-watering pots. In addition, you can use a wick system to turn just about any type of container with a drainage hole into a self-watering pot.



The disadvantages of self-watering pots are 1) in a two piece ceramic pot, it may take some trial and error to fill the outer pot to the correct level and 2) you need to check both your violet and the pot more frequently to be sure there is water in the reservoir and the potting mixture is moist but not saturated.

African Violet Self-Watering Pots -

Ceramic self-waterers

The traditional African violet self-watering pot is a two-piece ceramic pot. The bottom reservoir is glazed ceramic. Fill it about 3/4 full with water (some have fill lines) and insert the top part, which is usually made of porous unglazed ceramic and is the part that holds your plant. Ceramic self-waterers come in a variety of shapes, colors, and sizes, and are plain or delightfully decorated to show your violets off at their best!

Dandy Pot

The Dandy pot is a type of self-waterer that looks like an inverted top hat with a ruffled brim. The "hat" sits atop the reservoir. Dandy pots are available in many colors and sizes. Most come with a see-through reservoir that makes refilling a cinch.

Oyama Pot

The oyama pot is a self-watering pot that is used with a soil-less African violet potting mixture. Typically made of white plastic, the top part of the pot is slitted and sits atop the reservoir. Peat moss in the bottom of the plant container draws water from the reservoir into the potting mixture. Oyama pots are typically quite inexpensive and are the choice of many African violet hybridizers.

Wick System

A wick system is easy and inexpensive to make. You need a container to hold water (reservoir), a pot with a drainage hole, and a length of wicking cord. Your planted African violet may sit either atop the reservoir or along side it. First, cut a piece of wicking cord long enough to extend from your reservoir to about half the height of your pot. Thread the cord through the drainage hole in your pot, fill the pot about 3/4 full with potting mixture, separate and fan the threaded wick or coil a longer length of cord over the top of the mixture. Continue planting your violet, as you normally would and put the other end of the cord into your filled reservoir. When the water in the reservoir runs low, just fill it up again. You and your African violet will both be happy!

Common Problems

The African violet is one of the easiest plants you can grow. Although it isn't problem free, the two most common questions in growing African violets are "Why do African violets turn color?" and "How do I get rid of mealy bugs on my African violet?"

Why Do African Violets Turn Color?

Although several conditions may cause your African violet to change color, the two most common reasons are that your plant is too cold or too wet.

Because they're too cold

Although African violets prefer temperatures on the warm side (75F to 80F during the day), usually they acclimate well to normal home temperatures. However, even though your thermostat is set at 72F day and night, a plant located on a windowsill may still get a nighttime cold, which causes it to darken and eventually wither.

Some experts suggest that you remove your African violet to a warmer spot during the night, but remember that the Saintpaulia declines if you move it too often. The safest method to prevent night chilling is simply to draw the window shade at night. If your window is without a shade, provide protection by placing a newspaper or piece of corrugated cardboard between your African violet and the window.

Because they're wet

In the wild, African violets grow in mountain rock crevices in catch-as-catch-can soil composed of matter that literally falls through the cracks. This makes for a very sparse and porous growing medium, a preference that your domestic Saintpaulia inherits from its wild ancestors.

Water your African violets only when the soil feels dry to your touch. At watering time, be sure to empty any standing water in a tray or saucer. When watering your African violet from the top, be sure to keep water off the foliage since it causes discoloration in white or yellow rings, lines, or blotches. Over watering also makes African violets susceptible to leaf mold, which in turn makes the foliage appear to darken or turn color.

Exterminating Mealy Bugs on African Violets

As hairy as your African violet leaves are, they don't have dandruff! If you notice white cotton-like specks on them, they are most likely infested with *leaf mealy bugs*. In addition to leaf mealy bugs, which feed on the leaves, you should also check frequently for *soil mealy bugs* that feed on the roots of your Saintpaulias.

At the first sign of infestation by either type of mealy bug, it is very important to quarantine infested plants. Although soil mealy bugs don't spread as quickly as leaf mealy bugs do, plants that share a common watering tray are susceptible to infestation by both.

How to kill leaf mealy bugs

Leaf mealy bugs are also known as *foliar mealy bugs* or *cottony mealy bugs*. They are tiny— typically measuring 1/16 to 1/4 inch in length. Most commonly seen on the undersides of the leaves, they also infest the axils of the leaf and the crown of the plant.

Before you spot the leaf mealy bug, you might first see a change in the leaves of your African violet. Stickiness, wilt, color fading, and sooty mold (which shows up as dark specks on the tops of the leaves) may all be signs of leaf mealy bug infestation.

Although light infestations of leaf mealy bugs can be curtailed by swabbing the leaves with a cotton swab doused with Isopropyl rubbing alcohol (70%), for heavier infestations, you need to apply Acephate or Malathion.

How to kill soil mealy bugs

Soil mealy bugs, also called “blind”, “Pritchard”, and “root” mealy bugs, are full grown at just 1/16 inch and look like small grains of rice that cling to the roots of your Saintpaulias. It's typical for them to feed at the top of the root ball on the newest feeder roots of your plants.

Because they attack the roots of your African violet, soil mealy bugs inhibit your plant's ability to absorb the nutrients and moisture it needs for growth, resulting in the main symptom of infestation, slow growth of your African violet. In heavy infestations, you may see soil mealy bugs clustered about the main stem of your plant above the soil.

Traditional treatment for soil mealy bug infestation is application of Acephate or Malathion. Treatment should be daily and may take four or five days.

An ounce of prevention...

The best way to guard against mealy bug attacks is to isolate any new plants you bring into your home until you are positive there is no infestation. Afterwards, be sure to examine leaves and stems every time you water your African violets.

Mixing your African violet potting soil with a teaspoon of diatomaceous earth (DE) per liter of mix is also a good preventative and combatant against soil mealy bug infestations. DE is the skeletal remains of single celled plants (diatoms) that lived in prehistoric oceans. An effective natural insecticide, there is no chemical hazard in using DE. On the contrary, full of trace minerals, DE is beneficial to the soil.

Although our domestic cultivars don't tower to 300 feet like their wild relatives, the African violet with its many hybrids, bright colors, and cheerful disposition tops the list of many indoor container gardeners. Given a good start, a single Saintpaulias adds to indoor container gardening enjoyment with years of continuous bloom and dozens of new easily propagated plants.

About Us

HDK-BeheerBV company is the parent company of Gardening-Guides.com. Started in 2004, Gardening-Guides.com is the brainchild of webmaster Hans Dekker. It's his vision to offer you a panoramic view of gardening.



In addition to being the trailblazer for Gardening-Guides.com, Hans is also a talented Internet businessman and owner of Net Research, Netherlands. Starting with just a few articles on Holland bulbs and tulips, Hans has not only used his Internet expertise to grow a virtual garden that holds dozens of cultivars, but he has also cultivated a team of talented writers that provides you with ever-fresh news and insights into every type of gardening you can imagine.

The mission of gardening-guides.com is to provide you, the gardener with quality information about year-round gardening, garden related topics and the resources you need to find the plants, tools, and other gardening products you need to grow a successful and satisfying garden.

We hope you enjoyed All About African Violets and visit us at www.Gardening-Guides.com to read more informative articles about gardening. If you need more information about Gardening Guides, have a question, or concern, please do contact us! We're always happy to talk about gardening.

Gardening-guides.com
HDK Beheer BV
Kantershof 248
1104GM Amsterdam
Netherlands