

# 🌸🌸 GENERAL AFRICAN VIOLET CARE 🌸🌸

Cyndi Fink, M.S., Plant Ecology

## Pittsburgh African Violet & Gesneriad Society

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Because of their origination in the temperate rain forests of Africa, African violets are able to tolerate average house conditions and thrive easily. The common rule of thumb when determining the right conditions for violets is that if you're happy, they're happy. Although violets can tolerate a wide variety of light intensities, temperatures, and humidity levels, they thrive the best when these conditions are comfortable for us. Following are some tips to optimize these conditions to keep your plants healthy and blooming frequently.

### LIGHT

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Proper lighting is essential for growth and flowering. African violets need to be grown in strong light, but not direct sunlight, usually within a foot or so of an uncurtained window. Typically, growing violets in an east or west facing window is best. South facing windows covered with a sheer curtain will also work, or plants can be placed at the outside edge of full sunshine. North windows typically do not receive the light intensity required for violets to achieve good growth and flowering. Although high light intensity is essential for growth and flowering, too much light causes the foliage to yellow, become tight in the center, curl down, and become unattractive. Too little light results in fewer blossoms and the lengthening of leaf petioles as leaves reach for the light. Because each variety is different and may react differently to slight variations in light intensity, you may have to experiment with placement to optimize growth and flowering. Important factors to consider are outside overhangs, size of windows, proximity of plant to the window, shade trees blocking the sun, thickness of glass, and even the color of your neighbor's house and the amount of light it might reflect into your home. But don't despair, most violets are perfectly happy growing in an ordinary east or west facing window.

Light can also vary with the seasons. Although violets never need direct sunshine, it can be helpful for sustaining the plants through the winter months. Because of low light levels and lower temperatures in your home, plants typically rest during this time and cease blooming and growth, getting ready for a burst of bloom in the spring.

Because most of us have natural light available, this is an easy way to get started on an African violet collection. But if your windows quickly become overwhelmed with plants, you may want to consider growing with artificial light. Artificial light can be used exclusively, or be used to supplement natural light. Any regular fluorescent tube can be used, although putting a warm and cool bulb in a 2-bulb fixture supplies more of the wavelengths needed for enhanced growth and bloom. Special grow-light tubes are also available, accomplishing a similar result. A single 40 watt tube will light an area approximately 18 x 48", a double fixture and area about 30 x 48". Plants should be approximately 10" below the tubes. Too much or too little light results in symptoms mentioned previously. Lights should remain on for 12 - 16 hours, unless being used to supplement natural light. Only fluorescent light should be used, as incandescent light produces too much heat, typically causing plants to dry quickly and die.

### WATER

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Plants should be kept slightly moist and never soggy. Waterlogged plants quickly become infected with molds and die. The best method to determine if your plant needs water is by lifting the pot. If it feels light, it needs water. If it is still hefty, wait several days before watering. Another test is to feel the top of the soil. If it feels dry, then the plant needs watering. Water can be applied from the top or the bottom. If watering from the bottom, do not let excess water remain in the saucer for more than one hour. If watering from the top, be sure to lift the leaves and not get water on the foliage or in the center of the plant, as this can cause leaf spotting and rot. Water should be at room temperature, as too hot or too cold water can damage foliage and roots. Also, if using water from a municipal source, let the water stand overnight in a wide-mouthed container to allow excess chlorine gas to dissipate, which could be harmful to the plant.

### TEMPERATURE AND HUMIDITY

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Violets grow best at an even temperature that stays between 65° and 72°, with nighttime temperatures not below 60°. Certain varieties can withstand lower or higher temperatures with little adverse effect, while some plants are more particular. While Streptocarpus have similar cultural requirements, these plants seem more susceptible to higher temperatures. Violets placed next to cold, drafty, single-pane windows in the winter may also suffer lapses of growth, so be careful in choosing a window during the winter months.

Humidity is also an important factor in good culture. If the air is too dry, growth will be slow and buds may fall off before flowering. These conditions are more likely to occur in the winter months. If the humidity is above 40%, such as in a kitchen or bathroom, growth will be enhanced and flowers will be larger and last longer. Humidity can be increased by placing plants close to one another, by misting once a day with a fine spray of water or placing plants on trays of moist pebbles or blankets. If using this last method, place pots in saucers before placing in moist tray so the plant does not sit directly in the water, as this encourages disease and rot. Because of their rain forest origins, the higher the humidity, the more your plants will thrive. Low cost humidity meters can be purchased in many hardware stores and garden centers. Fresh air is also important for good growth, although cold drafts are harmful. A small fan aimed at the plants can help discourage some mildews, especially during the summer months. Placing plants in a common area in your home usually provides sufficient air circulation and allows your plants to be seen!

## GENERAL AFRICAN VIOLET CARE (CONTINUED)

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### POTS

African violets may be grown in plastic, clay, ceramic, or any type of pot with drainage, although watering requirements will vary depending on the type of material the pot is made from. The easiest type of pot to use is plastic, as they are easy to find, cheap, and easily cleaned. If you require a more attractive look, slip the plastic pot into a more decorative container. Unless the pots are new, all pots should be cleaned and sterilized before using. Rinse off any dirt and mineral salts from the pot first, soak overnight in a diluted bleach solution (approximately ¼ cup bleach per gallon), then rinse well.

Despite the size an African violet can attain, their root system is relatively small because the original species grew in small pockets of forest humus among rock crevices. Although it may look too small, pot diameter should not exceed 1/3 the diameter of the plant. Therefore, if your plant measures 9" across, it should only be in a 3" pot. Using the proper size pot also eliminates over-watering and rot. Standard violets typically fit in a 3-4" pot, with larger plants in 5-6" pots. Miniature violets grow well in 2¼" pots and semi-miniatures in 3" pots. Newly propagated plantlets can be divided and transplanted in 2" pots (plastic Dixie cups with a hole poked in the bottom work great) and repotted in several months into a 3 or 4" pot when buds start to appear.

Violets should be repotted at least once a year, more often for smaller varieties and fast growers. If the plant has increased in diameter and needs a bigger pot, gently remove the whole root ball from the original pot and remove any withered or tattered lower leaves by breaking or cutting them off cleanly from the main stem. Place plant in the new pot, filling the pot with additional soil to stabilize the root ball. Fill the pot up to the lowest leaf, leaving about ¼" for watering. Press soil into pot lightly, do not pack soil tightly into pot. If repotting into the same size or smaller pot for plant maintenance, remove the root ball and crumple away the soil and root ball until it is a manageable size to fit into the same size pot and allow addition of fresh soil. This is a good time to remove any "swan's necks" by merely cutting the thick stem with a sharp knife. Even if all roots are removed, repotting the thick plant stem will sprout more roots quickly.

Once potted, water lightly and then again in a day or two. Plants that have received a harsh repotting, such as removal of an entire rootball, may recover faster if placed in a plastic baggie or mini-greenhouse.

### FERTILIZERS

Many fertilizers are available for houseplants and African violets. Any commercial mixture will do, typically one with even nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium numbers, such as 20-20-20 is sufficient for healthy, year-round growth. In addition to nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, be sure to use a fertilizer that also contains trace elements, including magnesium, calcium, boron, and copper, which are essential for healthy growth and blooming. Peter's brand is a low-cost easy to find fertilizer that meets all the requirements for African violets. Switching to a different type of fertilizer, such as a blossom booster with a higher phosphorus value (20-50-20) is recommended to give your plants a boost in the springtime or before a show.

African violets are typically fertilized with each watering, but only at ¼ the strength of what is recommended on the product label. This method assures plants receive a constant supply of nutrients. Because each variety has different nutrient requirements, this regimen should be stopped for a month or so every 3-4 months so the plant and soil don't become saturated with nutrients. If this occurs, a rusty ring of fertilizer salts may appear along the pot rim and the plant may also exude rusty salts from the center leaves, which may also cause the leaves to become tight and brittle. If this occurs, repot the plant into fresh soil, removing most of the original soil.

### GENERAL CARE

Like anything else in your home, plants can become dusty. Plants can be rinsed under the faucet with tepid water. Greasy dust can be removed by spraying with diluted soapy water, then rinsing. Allow plants to dry before placing in direct light to avoid spotting of leaves. Dirt can also be removed using a soft paint brush. This works especially well to remove soil after repotting.

Once flowers are faded, they can be removed by snipping with sharp clippers. They should not be pulled from the plant, as large tears in the stem can be a route to infection. Faded and tattered lower leaves should be removed similarly. Once faded bloom and leaf stalks have dried, they can easily be pulled from the main stem.