

# 🌸 THE PERFECT PLANT 🌸

Cyndi Fink, M.S., Plant Ecology

## Pittsburgh African Violet & Gesneriad Society

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### TOP 10 LIST FOR SHOW PLANTS:

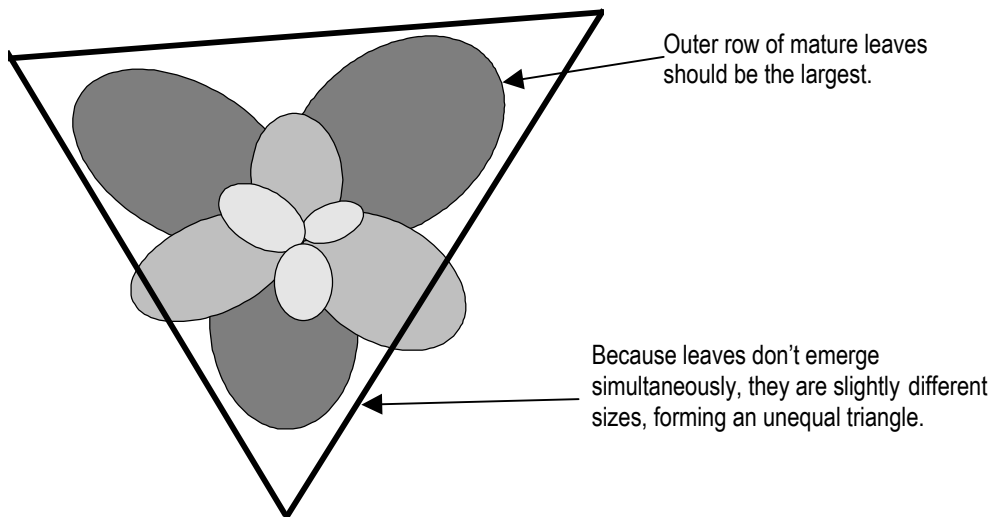
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1. The outside shape of plant should be round.
2. Should be in green or white pot, 1/3 the diameter of outermost leaves.
3. Foliage should be clean of dust and waterspots and unmarred.
4. Plant should be free of insect pests and diseases
5. No suckers should be present growing among lower leaves.
6. The lower row of leaves should be the largest leaves. No immature or "baby" leaves should be present.
7. Plant should have no neck!
8. Plants must have a single crown (except trailers)
9. Standard size plants should have 20-30 fresh flowers, semi-miniatures 6-12, and miniatures 10-20, in a bouquet or halo shape above the leaves.
10. Plant should have a variety name.

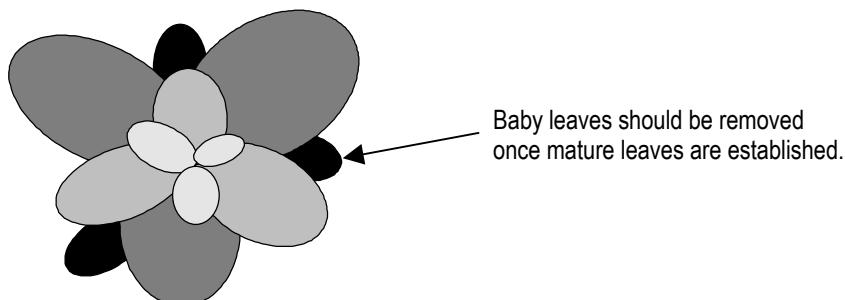
### HOW DO I GET MY PLANT TO LOOK LIKE THIS?

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1. Read AVSA Magazine's monthly "And the Winners Are..." column and choose a variety that is a popular show winner. Although all plants are hybridized to be beautiful, some perform better than others. Also, talk to fellow club members and see what varieties are good growers.
2. Select plants or plantlets that appear vigorous and are growing in a round, symmetrical pattern.
3. The pattern of three: New leaves emerge from the crown of the plant in groups of three. Because these leaves do not emerge simultaneously each set of leaves form a triangle with three unequal sides as they mature.



4. Once a newly potted plantlets matures for about 30 days and forms several sets of leaves, remove immature baby leaves from the outermost row. These are easy to spot, as they are smaller, weaker, and have a lighter texture and color than new, mature leaves.



## THE PERFECT PLANT, CONTINUED

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5. Do not be afraid to remove leaves that don't appear perfect. This can include leaves that don't fit into a symmetrical pattern, are past their maturity, or damaged. Often, if one leaf is removed, its two companions must also be removed to eventually achieve symmetry. Your plant may seem ugly at first, but removing leaves actually boosts the plant's strength so it can grow larger, more healthy leaves.

If you are afraid to remove leaves at first, use an index card or your hand to cover up the leaf or leaves in question, then look at the plant from the top to see how the removal(s) will affect the overall shape of the plant.

It is best to wait until damaged or undersized leaves mature and reach the outer rows before removal, as removing them before they mature may alter the symmetry of the entire plant. Undersized leaves are often caused by poor watering habits, not repotting frequently, and not adapting consistent culture and grooming habits.

When in question, remember less is probably better: According to Pauline Bartholomew's *Growing to Show*, properly groomed show plants rarely have more than three rows of leaves (not including 3 small center leaves). The only difference between a huge 20" show plant and a typical 9" standard is the size of the leaves and length of the petioles.

To remove leaves, either clip petiole about 1/4" from the main stalk with sharp clippers, or trace the petiole back to the stalk with your fingers and snap it off at the base. Do not try to pull or tear the leaf, as this will only increase the size of the wound, providing a pathway to infection.

6. Suckers, or small plantlets found growing between mature leaf petioles, are common in some varieties and rare in others. If you have a favorite that happens to be a sucker producer, you must be diligent in removing these suckers before they mature, as the larger they become, the greater the effect on the plant's symmetry.

While they're still barely noticeable, suckers are easily removed with a precise pair of surgical or jeweler's tweezers. Larger suckers can be removed manually and can often be rooted to make more plants, although letting suckers get this large has likely altered the symmetry of the adult plant.

Large suckers are acceptable on some varieties. While symmetry can be affected, propagation of a new plant via suckers is one of the two ways to propagate chimeras. Also, suckering is encouraged on trailers, as these plants are not considered perfect unless they have at three crowns. Removing the main crown on a trailer is one method to encourage suckering.

7. Take the plunge and remove that neck! Long necks are probably the most unsightly part of an African violet. Remove the plant from the pot and using a sharp, sterilized knife, decapitate the plant, removing all the roots and leaving about 1-2" of neck (hopefully your necks aren't much longer than this!) Scrape the neck with the knife to expose fresh tissue to within 1/4" of the bottom row of leaves, and plant in damp potting mix. Placing the plant in a baggie or terrarium can help get it re-established. Within weeks, you'll be rewarded with a healthy plant with no ugly neck!
8. LABEL! Most African violet shows will not accept a plant unless it is properly labeled with its AVSA registered name, although most competitions are friendly enough to assign a name to your no-name variety. Even if not entering your plants in a competition, it is still nice to know what you have so you can share leaves with your friends and name-drop all those varieties that are always in bloom for you!

Labels do not have to be fancy, a small plastic plant label written in permanent ink will suffice. Other methods are writing the name on the pot or using stickers. Labels can be very detailed, and can include information about when and where the variety was acquired, when it was potted, and its AVSA registration number.

9. Be diligent about overall grooming! Use a soft brush to remove dust, cat hair and some dried water spots. Use room temperature water for your plants and avoid getting water on the leaves. Although water won't hurt the leaves, mineral salts in the water may produce a water spot. Blot up any spilled water with a dry tissue to avoid spotting. If the water dries, a brush may remove some of the mineral salts, but a gentle rub with a saliva-dampened finger may be the easiest fix.

Remove spent blossoms with a sharp pair of snips or scissors, as spent blossoms are ugly and invite pests and diseases. Do not pull on the spent blossom stalk, as this may expose a large amount of plant tissue, an even larger invitation to disease!

**CONSISTENCY WITH GROOMING AND CULTURE IS THE BEST PATH TO HEALTHY, PERFECT PLANTS!!!**

# THE PERFECT PLANT, CONTINUED

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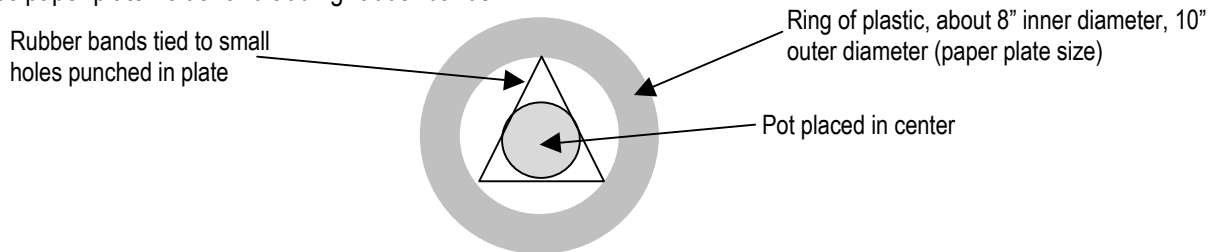
## TRICKS OF THE TRADE

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1. Leaves can sometimes be manipulated where YOU want them to go instead of where THEY want to go. If a leaf is just a little too far away from filling in a gap perfectly, small stakes (toothpicks work fine) can be used to gradually move the leaf into place. This process is gradual, and may take several steps. Push the leaf slightly and hold it in place with a stake, and let the leaf grow in this new position for a week or so, then repeat the process until the leaf is where you want it.

This technique should be done with caution, however, because moving the leaf too quickly may place too much stress on the petiole, weakening the leaf and possibly causing it to die. Unless it is only one month to show time, it is often easier to remove the culprit leaf and adjust symmetry by removing its two companions, and allow the plant to put its energy into growing a new, healthy set of leaves.

2. As leaves of some varieties get larger, the petioles may begin to droop. To prevent leaves from touching pot rims and possibly getting burned by fertilizer salts, some AV suppliers offer leaf support rings to lift heavy leaves off the pot rim. These simple rings use rubber bands to secure the ring to the pot. Homemade leaf supports can be made by cutting a circle from a cheap plastic paper plate holder and adding rubber bands.



Although leaf support rings can be helpful, healthy leaves on a well-hybridized variety should not droop significantly unless you have very large show plants. If this is the case, leaf support rings are essential until show time.

3. Getting your plants to bloom at the right time for a show is a skill that takes years of practice. Although I have not tried it myself, disbudding is the only way to make your plants have a perfect halo of blossoms floating above the foliage at show time. While there are some rules for disbudding, knowing your plants intimately is the only true method to assure success.

General rules for disbudding suggest removing all buds approximately 10 weeks before the show, using small tweezers. This time can vary depending on size and variety, as variegated varieties generally need more time to reform buds, and miniatures need less time. Growers typically increase light to 14 hours/day and begin using a blossom-boost fertilizer (high phosphorus or middle number). If all goes as planned, the plant will set new buds and be in full bloom in time for the show. Some growers disbud their plants all year until just prior to the show, which allows the plant to form large, healthy leaves throughout the year, and then put all its effort into one super-productive bloom cycle. Again, intimate knowledge of each plant is essential for disbudding to work, and many of us aren't willing to sacrifice the beauty of blooms for an entire year.

For a more in-depth explanation of disbudding, refer to Pauline Bartholomew's book, *Growing to Show*.