



GARDEN NOTES

THESE VIOLETS DON'T SHRINK

By Dennis Hinkamp

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During the winter, few plants bring as much color indoors as African violets.

First discovered in the country of Tanzania, African violets are native to eastern Africa says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. A baron from Germany spotted the delicate flowers and sent them back to his native country for research. For the first few years they were only grown in botanical gardens and conservatories. It wasn't until 1926 that they were introduced to the commercial industry in the United States.

Since their introduction they have become one of the most popular houseplants grown in this country, Goodspeed says. They have been crossed, radiated and mutated to develop new colors and flower shapes. About the only colors African violets are not available in are yellow, orange and a vivid red.

"African violets can be touchy about their surroundings and growth requirements but, if given proper care, will bloom and look attractive most of the year," Goodspeed says. "Start with a potting soil mix that drains well. Some nurseries sell potting mixes specifically formulated for African violets. When creating your own soil mix, be sure it drains well and is not easily waterlogged."

Once the soil has been selected, choose a pot that enhances the color of the flowers and has drainage holes in the bottom, he suggests. Sometimes African violets are planted in pots with large drainage holes, but the pot is then placed in a colorful aluminum foil liner that nullifies the ability of the pot to drain. These plants die quickly from root rot.

"Water the plants only when they need it," he cautions. "Over watering creates more problems than any insect or disease. Check the top inch of the soil before watering. If it is still moist, the plants do not need to be watered. Once the top inch of soil dries, water thoroughly, allowing the water to drain out the bottom of the pot. This ensures good water penetration and helps leach out any unwanted salts that can accumulate."

African violets bloom best when crowded, Goodspeed says. The leaves should hang above the soil but not touch the edge of the pot where salts collect that can injure the plant. If leaf stems lay across a wet rim of the flower pot, they may rot. To prevent this, cover the rim with paraffin or aluminum foil.

African violets do best in bright, indirect light, he adds. Place them in a room that receives about 12 to 15 hours of light a day. A room with a southern exposure is best, or one with large windows facing east or west. If fluorescent lighting is used to supplement sunlight, be sure to provide a minimum of 15 hours of light a day. The lights should be placed within 6 to 12 inches of the plant.

“African violets enjoy about the same room temperatures as we do,” Goodspeed says. “They prefer day-time temperatures around 70 degrees, and cooler nights of about 65 degrees. The higher the humidity the better. Utah is not known for its high humidity, so this may need to be supplemented by using a humidifier or a humidifying tray.”

Fertilize plants with a product specifically designed for African violets, he says. Apply it on a monthly basis from spring through fall. Let the plants slow their growth during the winter by reducing the amount of fertilizer. If minerals from fertilizing accumulate on the soil surface, water heavily to flush the soil, allowing them to drain well, or repot.

“Only a few pests bother African violets,” Goodspeed says. “However, the leaves and flowers should be inspected periodically for any visible signs of insects or damage. Remove dead flowers when they begin to droop.”

For more information, contact your local [USU County Extension office](#).

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