



African Violets

African violets, known botanically as *Saintpaulia*, are one of America's most popular houseplants. Their small stature enables them to be grown in small spaces. Under the right growing conditions, they are able to bloom almost continuously indoors. They are also available in a wide range of flower colors, leaf types, and growth habits.

History

The history of African Violets dates back to the late 18th century. Baron Walter von St. Paul discovered these blooming beauties growing in West Africa and sent samples or seed home to Germany. By the early 1900's African violets were blooming in Europe and around the world. The development of hybrid varieties increased the popularity of African violets. Since the 1920's hundreds of cultivars have been developed with an immense variety of flower and leaf colors, shapes, and sizes.

Characteristics

Flowers come in shades of blue, purple, lavender, pink, red, white, bi-colored and multi-colored. Their form ranges from single, star-shaped to double, fringed and ruffled flowers. Leaves can also be ruffled, scalloped, quilted and variegated.

Light

Proper light is necessary for good-looking plant. If there is too little light, the leaves will be thin and dark. Leaf stems will be long and thin. If there is too much light, the plants will look stunted with short leaf stems and small crinkled leathery leaves. Avoid direct sunlight as it will cause the leaves to yellow and burn. The best location is a northern or eastern window, especially in summer. Turn the plants occasionally to maintain even growth.

Temperature

The violet prefers 65-70°F nights with a daytime increase of 10-15°F. To guard against night chilling, remove violets from windows in the evening, or place a paper between the plant and the window. Chilled violets will turn dark within 24 hours, become water-soaked and wither. If temperatures are consistently higher than 70°F, optimum light and a higher humidity is required.

Humidity

High humidity is beneficial to African violets and a humidity tray is recommended. Place the violet on a shallow tray with gravel or decorative marbles. A shallow layer of water will provide extra humidity as it evaporates. Do not sit the bottom of the pot in the water, this will cause the violet to become too wet and its roots to rot.



Soil

African violets prefer a light loose potting soil that is high in organic matter, such as sphagnum peat moss and that provides good drainage. Any container will work as long as it has drainage holes. If you prefer a more decorative effect, set your pot inside of the decorative container.

Water

Proper watering of an African violet remains a controversial topic among violet growers. The soil should be evenly moist while keeping the crown of the plant dry. Keep cold water off the leaves. Water with room temperature water. Watering the plant from the top is the easiest method. Water the surface of the soil until it starts to drip out the drainage holes. To water from the bottom, fill the saucer under the pot and let it stand until the soil surface is moist and then drain off the excess water. With either method, wait until the top inch of soil feels dry to the touch before watering again.

Or, to water continuously, use a fiberglass wick. Insert one end through a hole in the bottom of the pot and fray the end so it spreads over the entire bottom of the pot. Place the plant into the pot and then place the wick into a water reservoir under the pot. The watering will be continuous. However, when plants are continuously watered from the bottom, salts tend to collect on the surface of the soil. Flush with water from the top about once a month to prevent damaging salt accumulation.

Fertilizer

Use a water-soluble fertilizer that is labeled for blooming plants. Fertilize according to the package directions during the active growing season (spring, summer and fall). Omit fertilizer in the winter months.

Questions or comments? Contact Jim Gainan via email jim@gainans.com.