

## BEGINNERS COLUMN

### BLUE RIBBONS?? A Beginner's Guide to Judging

By Joyce and Kent Stork

African Violet Magazine May/June 1993

Do you grow blue-ribbon violets? Are you pleased with how your violets are looking? Isn't this the same thing? No, not unless you are familiar with the standards set by The African Violet Society of America. It is sometimes hard for beginners to realize that a full head of bloom does not equal blue ribbons. There are other factors, besides blooming, that make a plant a winner.

For first-time readers of this magazine, it is obvious that one of the major concerns of AVSA is its supervision of violet shows in which plants are judged for their quality. AVSA carefully watches the administration of shows and the skills of the judges involved. A primary goal of the society is to educate the public regarding African violets and it deems shows and merit judging to be excellent tools in the education process.

What if you have no intention or opportunity ever to exhibit a plant for judging? Can these standards help you grow better violets? Yes! When you evaluate your own violets against the standards used for judging show violets, you can work to improve your horticultural shortcomings and grow even better plants. There is very little else in the world that can rival the simple beauty of a well-grown violet.

#### THE SCALE OF POINTS

In order to make judging consistent, a scale of points was designed to help judges look at all aspects of each plant. This scale allows the greatest majority of points for the appearance of the plant; although, it also does allow a few points for being true to the variety. The scale of points for judging most African violets is:

Symmetry or leaf pattern.....	25 Points
Condition (cultural perfection) .....	25 Points
Quantity of bloom.....	25 Points
Size and type of Blossom .....	15 Points
Color .....	10 Points

Presumably, only a perfect violet could ever receive 100 points. The perfect violet is a very rare item! Do notice that there are no points for extreme size. A perfect violet could be less than 6 inches across; it could be 12 inches across; it could be 24 inches across. Only when all other factors are even, when plants are tied in point scoring is the nod given to the larger plant.

So, choose your best violet, and let's judge it!

#### SYMMETRY

Beautiful foliage patterns greatly enhance the overall appearance of an African violet. The goal here is to grow a plant whose leaves lay in precise overlapping rows. For perfect symmetry, there must not be any

apparent leaves missing, and there should not be spaces between the leaves where the soil or table surface below is visible.

The perfect plant would have a very round shape, and each of the leaves in a row would be exactly the same size as the other leaves in that row. Each succeeding row's leaves would be the same as or slightly larger than the row above it. The petiole (stem) of each leaf would be just long enough to extend the leaf beyond the row above, but not so far that the resulting pattern shows gaps between the leaves.

Achieving perfect symmetry isn't always easy.

First of all, violets are individuals. Each variety has a tendency toward a type of foliage pattern. Some varieties do not consistently form a good over-lapping foliage pattern. Some varieties are very sensitive to warm temperatures and tend to grow long petioles which makes the plant look "open" with many peekholes between the leaves. Some varieties need more light than others to grow in compact form. Some varieties have ruffled or wavy foliages that resist laying neatly on top of previous rows.

Aside from the differences between varieties, it is common for there to be differences between plants that are of the same variety. Think of a litter of puppies. There may be one or two pups that are "show quality"; they show all the qualities of the breed to perfection. There are other pups who are very nice, but may have some small fault according to the standards of the breed; these are called "pet quality."

Finding the "show quality" symmetry in a group of plants requires looking at the pattern in which leaves are growing from the crown. Generally, the first three rows will show the plant's tendency. The leaves should form an even and compact rosette.

The plant will do much of the work in growing out symmetrically, but the grower has some responsibility, too. Care must be taken to give the plant enough secure space to avoid breaking leaves from crowding, bumping, or falling. Maintaining even and constant horticulture is also critical. The plant must be regularly fertilized and watered, and the light and temperature must be consistently correct. Overhead light, such as fluorescent tubes, will significantly improve symmetry.

To judge the symmetry, take off up to three points each for gaps between leaves, for changes in leaf patterns and for each leaf that is obviously missing.

How many points did you get for symmetry? Could you improve that score immediately by removing one leaf or even a row or two of leaves?

## CONDITION

Condition, or cultural perfection, is the term used to describe the quality of the horticulture. Mistakes in growing are reflected in the appearance of the plant. Some of these are easily remedied in a few minutes.

One of the easily-corrected problems of condition is dust or debris on the leaves. Plants can be washed at the sink under a very gentle flow of tepid water, being very careful to keep water away from the center crown. Very dirty plants benefit from being misted with a soapy solution (a few drops of dish detergent in a quart of water) and then rinsed. Blot the leaf surface and keep the plant out of direct sunlight until the moisture has evaporated. In some cases, brushing with a soft brush (like a make-up brush) will remove cat hair, light dust, and other debris on the leaves. This brushing should be done from the center of the plant outward.

Another easily correctable fault is leaving stubs of removed leaves and bud stems. These need to be removed completely. It is a good policy to avoid letting these rot away, as they can allow fungus or bacteria to enter the plant. A dull pencil point, a nut pick, or even a dentist's cleaning tool can be used to prod these away. Along these same lines, any dead or fading flowers and any flowers with seed pods should be removed.

Young violets have smaller leaves than mature plants. As the plant ages, the baby leaves do not continue to increase in size. This is why small leaves can often be found growing under larger leaves. These leaves are not necessary to the plant's energy-making system and should be removed. At the same time, remove any leaves that are faded and tired looking.

A violet should be in a pot that is correctly sized to the span of the foliage. A general rule is that the pot diameter should be about one-third of the diameter of the foliage. No rules govern how deep the pot should be, but most good growers feel that pots that are about four inches deep (or less) are best. Violets have shallow roots.

A neck between the bottom row of leaves and the soil is a sign of horticultural neglect. A neck of one or two inches can be buried by trimming away enough from the bottom of the soil ball to sink the plant lower into the same pot. Follow the rules of the paragraph above, if you are tempted to increase the pot size to bury the neck. (If the neck is longer than two inches, it would be wise to refer to the Beginner's Column in the November/December 1992 issue of this magazine for a complete explanation.)

Some condition problems are irreversible. Cracks, mars, and bruises on the leaves can't be hidden, except to remove the entire leaf. Removing the leaf might ruin the symmetry. Exhibitors learn to compute which fault will cause a bigger point deduction and act accordingly. Giving plants safe and adequate space where they are not crowded or subject to other injuries, and handling the plants with care when they must be picked up, is critical to avoiding these blemishes.

There are 25 points allowed for condition. To judge, take off a half point for each faded blossom; take off up to a point for each occurrence of dust or debris, each stub, and each seed pod; also take off a point for each baby leaf and faded leaf; take off up to three points for over- or under-potting and the same for a neck, take off up to a point for each crack, mar or bruise (little ones count less).

How many points do you score for condition? Could you improve by cleaning, by removing stubs, flowers and leaves, or by repotting?

## QUANTITY OF BLOOM

The amount of bloom on the violet is very important in judging. One of the most difficult skills for a judge to master is evaluating how many blossoms ought to be open on the plant. Very large plants need to have more and tiny plants less. To simplify the problem, The AVSA Handbook for African Violet Growers, Exhibitors and Judges suggests that the judge should expect about 25 fresh open blossoms on most standard-sized African violets. This would be on plants that are about 12 inches in diameter.

On an average day, there are very few violets that could stand up to this measurement! The reason that the goal is so high is because it is rather easy to control when the violets bloom. We can time it so that the maximum number of blossoms are open exactly at showtime. This is done by removing all blossom stems for a period of time, up until approximately eight weeks before the plant should be in full bloom. The recommended time period for disbudding varies between growers, and some varieties need more or less time to come into bloom, but this is a good guideline.

Many exhibitors who grow for show have learned to expect far more than 25 open blooms on the best plants in the show. It is not impossible for some plants to carry over 200 fresh blossoms. They are incredible!

To judge your plant for quantity of bloom, count the number of fresh, open blooms. If the number is less than 25, deduct a half point for each missing blossom.

How many points do you score for bloom? You might try disbudding to see if you could increase this score on another day.

## SIZE AND TYPE OF BLOOM

Now we get into the points allowed for a plant performing at its genetic potential. Each plant variety has a genetic inclination to produce blossoms of a certain size and type. By type, we mean single, semi-double, or double layers of petals and the shape of the blossom, such as pansy (two smaller upper lobes) or star (five evenly sized lobes). If there are blossoms on the plant which are not correct for the variety, it is a fault, and points should be deducted. Remember the puppies? The plants that vary are "pet quality" and shouldn't score highly in competition.

It may be obvious to some, but if your plant does not have a variety name attached to it, it is "pet quality". No puppy, without Kennel Club papers, gets to be

entered in a poodle show, regardless of how much it looks like a poodle. No papers, no show! Learn to keep the violet with its name.

To judge for correct size and type of blossom requires lots of experience and a good book. A good judge needs to know how the variety is supposed to grow and bloom. In order to help judges, AVSA publishes a Master Variety List that describes many of the varieties currently being cultivated.

In addition, good judges also try to grow many plants to get experience, and frequently visit shows and speak with other growers about their favorite violet varieties.

Unless you are able to compare your plant's blossom with other plants of the same variety, do not deduct points here unless the blossoms are not consistently the same size or type on your one plant.

You should be able to have all 15 points on size and type of blossom, but if you decide to enter a show, you must verify that the plant is blooming true.

#### **COLOR OF BLOSSOM**

This is another set of points awarded for blooming true to the variety's genetic code. The blossom color must conform to the variety color description in the *Master Variety List*.

Sometimes African-violets may bloom in colors that are faded or are not the intensity of color expected for those varieties. Improper temperatures and light or poor fertilization are the most common causes.

Sometimes, varieties will show signs of mutation (or sporting) by putting up a blossom stem that is entirely different from the other blossoms on the plant. This is especially true of bi-color plants and fantasies (blossoms that are speckled). This is a fault which costs one-half point per wrong-color blossom.

Again, you can have the full 10 points unless you can see an inconsistency in blossom color or know that it is not blooming the color that it is supposed to. Learn to shop for plants that are blooming true. Avoid the novelty of a plant which has blossom stems that carry different colors. It's interesting, but it's a "pet."

#### **UNFORGIVABLE SHOW FAULTS**

Before we add up your score, take another look at your plant. If it has evidence of insects or disease, it is not allowed to be judged. In a violet show, this protects other exhibitors' plants from being exposed to such problems.

You also may not judge if the violet has suckers or secondary plants growing between the leaves. Except for trailing types, violets that are judged must be single crowned! If suckers are removed by prodding them with a dull pencil point, or other sucker plucker, when only four leaves are evident, they can be easily controlled. Well-developed suckers must be removed for the good of the plant, but doing such may significantly damage the symmetry. It is best to keep a close eye on your plants and to remove small suckers before they begin to distort the growth pattern.

#### **YOU'RE A WINNER**

Now total the score for each of the five areas. If the total score is above 90 points, the plant deserves a blue ribbon. If it scores from 80 to 89, it would earn a red ribbon; and 70 to 79 points would score a white ribbon. Below 70 points earns no award.

All these numbers may seem intimidating, and you may tend to be overly critical (most novice judges are). AVSA judges work in panels of three at shows, which helps them to make balanced decisions. You might find that it would be helpful to invite a violet friend over so that you could work together evaluating the quality of your plants.

If you followed our suggestions, you probably noticed that as you fixed some of the correctable problems to increase your score, you also got a prettier plant.

There is a real joy in judging your plants against the scale of points. It will raise your expectations of your plants, and higher standards result in higher quality. Maybe this judging primer will even lead you into attending a judging school or entering a violet show. You wouldn't regret it.

Don't worry if you don't score high today. Set your goals to improve, ask questions to find out more, and keep reading this column!

*(Note: Both of the manuals referred to in this column. The AVSA Handbook for African. Violet Growers, Exhibitors, and Judges and Master Variety List, are available from the AVSA office. See the inside front cover for more information.)*