

Tidbits for the Novice African Violet Grower

By Debbie McInnis

As I am a relatively new grower, Pat Hancock and Mel Grice asked if I might share some ideas that perhaps a new club member might want to know. So, these are the things I wished I had known when I first began growing African violets. Some of them I was initially confused about; some, I have learned by experience the “hard way.” I hope you will find them helpful.

SOIL - Use a different soil mixture for Miniatures. Their soil should not be as rich as what is used for Standards. Keep it light. Don't pound soil down to get air pockets out. Just knock the pot three times to settle the soil. Experiment with soil – but don't repot everything at once. Repot a few, and if plants do well, repot the rest. It is easier to pot a few than to have to repot your whole collection. Adding special additives could burn plants, etc.

WICKING – Growers place wicks in different ways: They coil wicks on bottoms of pots or in the soil by the roots, or they bring the wick up through the soil. There are several ways to wick. If the plant goes dry while wicked and there is water in the reservoir, check to see if the wick has dried out. Wicking won't work if the wick is not completely wet. Pour water through plant or bottom water until you are sure the wick is saturated. Periodically check your wicks – especially if they are on egg crate.

FERTILIZERS – More is *not* better. Learn what the label numbers represent, and which of them helps foliage, blossoms, roots, etc. If plant has gone dry, don't just wet the wick and soil and immediately put the plant back on reservoir with fertilizer in it. Fine roots will be damaged. Slowly replenish with a small amount of plain water, and cover with a dome or bag until new roots can grow. Then use water only.

After a couple of weeks, place the plant back on the fertilizer reservoir. Then, your plant will then be able to utilize the fertilizer.

REJUVENATING A PLANT – An African violet may develop a long neck and need to have the neck and root ball removed. This can be intimidating to novice growers. After the “chop”, you will only have a short neck with zero roots. Gently scrape the sides of the newly shortened neck and place the plant in a pot prepared with fresh, moistened soil. Set the pot in a plastic bag for three to four weeks until new roots grow. The moisture inside the closed bag will act as a greenhouse and encourage new root growth.

LABEL YOUR PLANTS – When repotting, label the plant with its full name and the date of repotting so you will know when you should repot again. I also write the hybridizer's name on the label to become more familiar with how different hybridizers' plants grow. Never take short cuts by writing just part of the name – for example, “Buckeye Main Event” is the plant's name, not just “Main Event”.

I write just about everything that I have done to the plant on Solo cups, for Miniatures. I use freezer tape or electrical tape to write name and information for larger plastic pots, so I can reuse the pots again (after they have been cleaned with bleach). Fold each end of tape so it is easy to grab and rip off when you repot again.

POTTING UP – Learn the rules of pot size for show: *the 3-1 ratio*. There is a big difference in potting up baby Standards to grow and become large. This process – to grow large violets to their potential large size defies the “show” rules. This was very confusing for me. As a novice grower, I wouldn't pot up baby plants until the plant would reach the 3-1

ratio. This took forever! (I had the best Semi-miniature Buckeyes around.) The beginner always reads that they should pot up by the show rule. Remember there are a “show rule” and a “grow rule”.

TRAILERS – Learn about the three crown minimum rule for show and have an experienced grower teach you how to remove leaves and groom for show. This can be very intimidating at first. Try to groom each crown so it can be distinctly seen.

ISOLATION – JUST DO IT! – When new growers first start out, they just don’t get it. I know some growers who still don’t isolate correctly or for very long. I know from experience that in the beginning we are impatient and want to get those baggies off and place plants into our collections. In my opinion, trading plants over the Internet and Round Robins is just crazy! But, if you must – ISOLATE. Because of these trades and growers not isolating, the spread of Impatiens Necrotic Spot Virus has reached all across our country. Think about it – it is not uncommon for some eBay growers to have 500 – 1000 plants or more.

There is no way they can confidently monitor pests. When you receive plants from them, you may notice spray residue on leaves. That’s fine. They have sprayed. There is no evidence of adult thrips, but what about the eggs in the soil that (under your conditions – on your shelves – among your clean collection) could hatch!

When I buy or bring a new violet into my home (even if it is from a trusted violet club buddy), the first thing I do is cut off blooms. Repeat – **cut off blooms** before plants come into your home. Not doing that is how I got thrips. (Thrips, by the way, is always spelled and pronounced plural.) I couldn’t bear to cut off all the beautiful blooms from plants that I had purchased at my first Ohio convention.

Now I place violets into Rubbermaid® containers that have been lined with newspaper (bottom and lid) and place a No-Pest Strip® in the container with the double-potted violets. This helps to absorb moisture. I leave the plants in this box for twenty-four hours. You need to do this three times, one week apart. This will kill thrips, springtails and gnats. The No-Pest Strip® should be returned to its

original package and put into a plastic zip-lock bag. It can be stored this way for four to six months. I must warn you that I have had some damage to leaves (spots) using this method. Be sure you use newspaper to line boxes and perhaps roll extra paper in the box to absorb excess moisture. You don’t have to use plastic boxes. You may use a cardboard box and then place it inside a large garbage bag or clear lawn & garden bag.

Repot the plant to get it out of its old soil. Sometimes, I repot as soon as I can. Other times, I wait several weeks so the plant can get used to its new growing conditions. Check the roots for mealy bugs and add Marathon® to the soil. After at least 4-6 months (or longer) or before they are placed in among your collection (this is another “hard knock” lesson), repot again, check the roots again and add more Marathon®. Plastic bags are a must for isolating new plants. Even after introducing them into your collection, keep new plants on individual reservoirs for awhile before placing on community reservoirs- just in case something was missed.

POWDERY MILDEW – Immunox® works. I have Immunox®, multi-purpose fungicide spray concentrate made by Spectracide. You can buy this at most garden centers and big box stores. It comes in a black plastic bottle with an orange label. A bottle runs around \$20.00. It will last a long time. (The directions say: 1 oz. to one gallon of water. I have used maybe 6 oz. in less than two years.) To spray on the leaves, I mix 1½ tsp with a quart of water and apply with a 3 oz. plastic spray bottle that has a great fine mist spray. Perhaps your club could buy a bottle of Immunox® for members to share.

PESTICIDES, INSECTICIDES, and MITICIDES – I went ahead and bought several of these for “just in case”. Check the shelf life before purchase. Follow instructions. Wear protective eye-wear and clothing.

Marathon® – mealy bugs and thrips (systemic)

Conserve® - thrips

Forbid® – mites (a small amount runs about \$20 on the Internet. One dip or spray does the trick.)

Avid® – mites

If you “think” you have mites – **make sure** you have them before you treat. Use your County Extension office. Buy a 3ox loop. Bring the suspect plant (in a plastic bag) to your club for advice – that’s what we’re here for.

BOOKS AND INTERNET – READ! – Use your club’s library. “*Growing for Show*” by Pauline

Bartholomew is a godsend for new growers. ***“Insects, Pests and Diseases of the African Violet Family”*** by Nancy Robitaille and ***“African Violets: Gifts from Nature”*** by Melvin Robey are also helpful. You can find just about anything on the Internet. I read African violet forums and have learned a lot from other growers’ experiences.

PROCRASTINATION – Your worst enemy! Not to procrastinate has been my number one goal this year ... still room for improvement. Make a “to do” list and mark off items as they are completed. Have an empty shelf for violets that need some extra attention – **deal with them that week**. Inspect and always be on the lookout for pests. If you find something – treat it. The sooner you get to it, the better – before your whole collection is infested. If you find thrips on one plant in your collection, you must treat the whole collection.

EXPERIENCE – Remember what works for one grower may not work for you and your growing conditions. You can read and implement, ask and be shown, but experience will be your true teacher.

LUCK – Make your own!

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