WICK WATERING
By Heather Harkness

Wick Watering is a method favored by growers with large collections. It is mostly efficient and cuts down the amount of time spent watering. However, knowing that your plants are getting water and nutrients, it is very easy to leave your plants to their own devices. This can lead to problems such as wayward leaves, pests gaining control, dead leaves, flowers causing rot, and so on.

So, it is still important to give your plants the 'once-over' each week. Basically, wick watering is a self-watering system using a wick and a reservoir. The wick must be of a synthetic fiber such as nylon venetian blind cord, acrylic yarn, strips of nylon stocking, or any other non-rotting fiber.

Venetian blind cord can stick up some distance into the pot as well as extending down into the reservoir; acrylic yarn can be coiled around the inside at the bottom of the pot with enough length to reach the bottom of the reservoir. It is a good idea to soak new wicks in water containing dishwashing detergent as this breaks the surface tension and enables the yarn to conduct the water more easily to the plant. Commercial reservoirs are available, but there are usually plenty of containers around the home that make suitable reservoirs. Carry-out food containers, containers from the deli, and margarine containers are just some that can be adapted to your requirements. As long as it is large enough to hold enough water for about three weeks, and has a good fitting lid, you are in business.

Obviously, a hole is required in the lid for the wick to pass through. It is a good idea to drill a second hole nearer to the edge, which you can use for refilling the reservoir without lifting off the pot.

Wick watering works by capillary action. Water and nutrients travel up the cord and keep the potting mix moist, but not soggy. As with the other methods of watering, the potting mix must be open and airy rather than a heavy mix, which will keep the plant too wet. Bear in mind, too, that wicks can vary with the different types wicking at different rates.

It is a matter of experimentation at first to get the combination of wick and potting mix just right. In some instances, the potting mix can become saturated because the wick is too absorbent. If this happens, change to a thinner wick or when re-potting only allow the wick to extend about 3-4 cms into the pot. Less water will then be drawn up. Also, check your potting mix. It may be too heavy. If a plant becomes too dry on thewick system, it could be that the wick is not absorbent enough. In this case, change the wick to a thicker one, or use two wicks in the pot. Look at the texture of the wick. A loosely woven one will draw up more water than a tightly woven one.

Sometimes the wick can be covered in algae and roots. In this case, replace the wick or wash it carefully without removing from the pot. Algae can be a problem with wick watering, especially with a clear container, light can penetrate it, and the algae blooms. Other than excluding the light by using colored or opaque containers, there is not much that can be done except frequent washing with bleach added to the washing water.

When potting the plant, the wick should be wet and inserted into the pot as described above. The potting mix should be moistened, then plant in the usual way. The potting mix and the wick need to be moistened so that the wick can start drawing up the water. Sit the plant on the lid of the reservoir with the wick dangling into the container of water.

The plant should then be kept moist by drawing up water until the reservoir is empty. Once again, keep a watch on your plants.

In hot weather, the water supply can be used up rather quickly, and, in the winter time, it is sometimes necessary to remove the pots from the reservoirs as they do not need as much food and they can become too cold.

Fertilizer can be added in a more diluted amount to the water in the reservoir, thus giving the plant a continuous supply of food, as well as yet again making the grower's job less difficult. The constant supply of food and moisture usually contributes to
quicker and stronger plant growth than can be achieved with the top or bottom watering methods.

If you have a big collection, then it is possible to use community type reservoirs, which will hold several plants. A large tray, such as a kitty litter tray, capable of holding about 3 cms of water, with wire mesh or a cake cooling rack to support the pots above the water level, is ideal. The wicks pass down through the wire mesh into the tray. Refilling the trays takes less time than refilling individual reservoirs, but do keep an eye on your plants.

There is a slight risk with this communal system. If one of the violets develops a disease or is attacked by pests, then the problem can spread easily and quickly to the other plants. I feel that the slight risk is outweighed by the time and effort saved in watering and feeding the plants.

As with other watering methods, it is possible to allow the reservoir to remain dry for a day or two, and even allow the top surface of the potting mix to dry out a little, but do not allow the whole pot to become dry. If a newly potted plant is drying out, it is likely to be because the wick and the potting mix were not moist enough for the capillary action to begin. Water again and set the pot back on the reservoir. When using communal trays, make sure that the shelf is level. If not, one end of the container may not supply enough water for the wicks. I have rectified this problem by placing a small length of wooden beading under one edge of the tray to level it.

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