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# The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

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I see that in the last issue of this newsletter I was saying that summer was just about over. And now, just two months later I am definitely feeling as though winter arrived just yesterday. No sign of rain, unfortunately, but quite cold and windy. So now it's time to make sure that the plants don't get too cold.

I don't find I need to use a heater in my plant room, but manage the humidity and temperature by varying the fans and the ventilation. Seems to work, although now that I have fewer lights in use than before it can be harder to keep temperatures up in mid-winter.

In the last two months I attended the Hunter Valley African Violet Society Show. It was really spectacular, although as is often the way, not enough visitors to enjoy it. Photos on p.4.

I am sorry to say the photos in this issue may not be quite up to standard. That is because my camera died recently. My back-up camera isn't too well either, so I am now making do with taking photos with my phone. I have a new camera on order but it hasn't arrived yet. Another thing to chase up.

## Surprise Package



My favourite of the moment. When it first bloomed for me—a few seasons ago now—I will admit I was unimpressed. Plain pink flowers. Of a slightly unusual shade. Nice, yes, but not exciting by any means. After all there are plenty of plain pink flowers.

But then when the flowers have been open for a while, especially in cooler weather, they show an interesting star-pattern in the centre. You should be able to see that in the close-up photo of a single bloom at the top of this page.

Another one of Margaret Taylor's hybrids, it is certainly one that has its moods. Definitely one for the cooler weather. But then, these days that's my more favoured time of the year, too.

## More Fun with Potting Mix

Well, I am still using the perlite/peat moss potting mix and am very happy with it. The last time I added more perlite than the previous 60% and find that drains better, and that seems very important with the cooler weather coming on. So all the violets are growing well at the moment and it is a pleasure to walk into the plant room in the mornings.

But my curiosity is still burning bright and I can't resist the opportunity to try a few different little things.

### *Sphagnum moss—*

Last time I told you about some plants I had rooted and even grown in pure sphagnum moss. I decided to try this with African violets. Just to remind you, the photograph at right shows two plantlets started without roots in pure sphagnum on the left, and in standard African violet mix on the right.



That photograph was taken in mid-March. Now below it is a photograph taken in mid-May, two months later. They have been watered and fertilised consistently together on a combined reservoir so they are comparable. The plants have increased in size more than is obvious in the photograph as I have reduced the size of the photo to keep it the same size as the preceding picture.



The difference in the later photograph is obvious.

The sphagnum moss plant which powered ahead initially now does not look as healthy as the plant in the normal African violet mix. Although its leaves are still a richer green, the newest leaves are not growing very well being quite small compared to the leaves in the plant in normal mix. And there is a glaring problem in the leaf that is showing signs of burn of some sort. The outside leaves (which can't be seen in the photo) are badly marked.

So the plant that was doing best in plain sphagnum, not corrected for pH did superbly well initially but now has been well and truly overtaken by the plant in standard mix. Both are just starting to come into flower and the standard one is slightly ahead.

### **Why is it so??**

Obviously the sphagnum moss is an excellent medium for rooting, presumably because of its open structure with plenty of air, but over time the pH tells. Or that is my explanation based purely on what I see before me. African violets do suffer if the pH is too low. It is best when it is just slightly acid—probably around 6.5 to 6.8.

Of course both plants are well overdue for repotting. As usual my plants have been taking

second place to the other happenings in my life and this little job has had to wait. Fortunately the violets are fairly patient. I have decided that it is time to say goodbye to the plant in the straight sphagnum. Clearly it is not doing very well and I think I have learned and



demonstrated all I can from it. The other one will be potted up as soon as possible into a larger pot of the same standard potting mix.

But there is just one thing more about the plant in sphagnum moss. As you should be able to see in the photo at right, although I know it isn't all that clear, there are a lot of roots growing out of the pot and down into the wick-watering container. This is not happening with the other plant.

Now this can happen when the plant has completely filled the pot with roots, but I think something else is happening here.

I have seen before where the roots of a plant in an unsatisfactory mix will do this when they are wick watered. I think that the roots are just simply growing down into the water to get the necessary liquid and nutrient that way.

Anyway, I don't want to harp on roots too much, although they are so important. Let's look at flowers. The plantlets I have been working with here are of 'RD's Illusion', a local hybrid.

Really this is a very pretty flower. I have grown it before but it hasn't been in my collection for some years. I am glad to welcome it back. As so often is the case, I wonder why I didn't keep it in the first place? Trying to make space for something else I suspect!



### **Perlite/vermiculite vs perlite/chopped sphagnum**

The last two photos show the little plantlets of 'The Alps' that were planted some weeks after the 'RD's Illusion' ones.

One plant was in a perlite/vermiculite mix and the other in a perlite/sphagnum moss mix. Both were corrected for pH. In the top photo taken two months ago, the vermiculite/perlite mix is on the right. Can you tell which is which in the bottom photo? I can't unless I look at the mix or the label.



Further evidence that pH is very important here. Both have great root systems.

But what is the deposit on the leaves? Don't know. I don't believe it is fertiliser. They have since been cleaned and are doing fine.





## Elegantly Simple, or Simply Elegant?

*Saintpaulia rupicola* as it used to be called, or more correctly now known as *Saintpaulia ionantha* subsp. *rupicolus*, is a very lovely species.

It is a long-term favourite of mine that I have been growing for many years. It grows easily, prefers warmth and comes into flower rapidly. And the real winning point is that its leaves

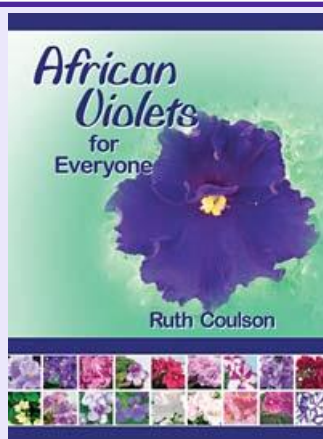
have a most appealing soft velvety feel. What more could we want?

Although this one, as I say is my favourite, others are interesting for other reasons. Some are trailing plants that will rival some of the hybrids. Some grow very large. There are flowers all the way from a really dark blue/purple to a much paler blue, and in the case of *Saintpaulia ionantha* subsp. *orbicularis*, which is virtually bi-coloured. *Saintpaulia shumensis* is a fairly easily grown small plant that you can grow with your miniature hybrids. A great thing about it is that it does best in cooler temperatures.

Grow some species if you can. It is another section of African violets that has great interest.

After all, it has been said that “we owe it to them to grow them” because it is from the species (the naturally occurring plants in the wild) that all our modern hybrids have been derived.

You may wish to know more about the species African violets. To find out more here is a useful reference: <http://www.gesneriads.info/articles/saintpaulia/saintpaulia/>



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## The Hunter Valley African Violet Show

This show was held earlier this month and the plants were wonderful.

If you are not accustomed to attending shows then I urge you to do so. So much to see, so much to learn, so many people to talk to, friends to make, plants to buy and so on. If you live anywhere near an African violet show you must attend.

If you can't, well I hope you will enjoy these pictures instead.



*Candyman—judged as Best in Show*



*Red Delicious*



*Jays' Icecastle—Best Trailing African Violet and a host of other awards.*

*I hope you will excuse the brevity of this issue. Personal matters have again intervened. I have plenty more to say—of course—but next time!*



*Minuet—Best Miniature/Semi-mini*

*This photo was taken a few weeks later when the grower again agreed that it was even better than at showtime.*

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