

Beginners Column
Secrets to Blooming Success

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There are many reasons why African violets are so dear to our hearts, but the fact that they bloom tops the list. Very few other plants in the world can live in our homes and bloom almost all the time – with minimum care.

Sometimes, however, even violets can pout and not bloom as well as we might like. There are a few “secret” methods that anyone can use to encourage better blooming

SECRET #1 – LIGHT: It’s not much of a secret that an African violet will bloom better in good light. Light is one of the primary ingredients plants need to produce the energy necessary for the production of blossoms. In our experience, the most common reason why violets are not blooming is because they have not been placed in adequate light.

Violets that do not receive enough light will often communicate their problem by reaching their leaves upward or growing toward the light source. Often the petioles (the leaf stem) will elongate and the new leaves will grow to a smaller adult size.

When violets are to be grown at a window, they need to be within 12 to 18 inches from the glass. If they are further away, in most situations, the light is too diffused. It also helps to place the plant at a large window. Tiny windows or heavily draped windows do not allow much light to enter.

Windows that face the morning or midday sun are often the most desirable here in Nebraska because the plants are not receiving direct sunlight during the hottest part of the day. Be aware that violets love bright light but dislike extreme heat. The best window will be one which properly balances these factors.

If there is no window which can produce enough light, then the grower may wish to consider purchasing a fluorescent light unit. These can be very inexpensive “shop lights” or beautiful and more costly light stands. But any fluorescent light (we use mostly cool white tubes, occasionally in combination with Gro-lux wide spectrum) will produce a light spectrum that will significantly increase the amount of bloom.

As a general rule, the light should be on 10 to 12 hours a day and be 10 to 12 inches from the violet plant with adjustments made according to the plant’s reaction. If there is too little light, the plant will stretch up toward the light; if there is too much, the plant foliage will show signs of bleaching (loss of green color) or the plants may grow with tight centers.

SECRET #2 – WATER: Another secret to getting a plant to bloom and to stay in bloom is to find a system of watering which allows the soil around the roots to stay evenly moist but not drenched. When tiny buds begin to set on the plant, they are extremely fragile, and if the plant should be allowed to become thoroughly dry at that point, the buds will wither and dry off. Furthermore, when a plant is in bloom it is transpiring more moisture into the air than usual, so the plant is liable to dry out more quickly when it is blooming, and the blossoms are likely to be the first part of the plant to suffer.

There are many systems for constant watering that work well – wicking, capillary matting, “Texas” potting, and specially designed pots with water reservoirs. Violets can also be hand watered with the soil begins to feel somewhat dry to the touch but that requires a wary eye, since not all the plants will use water at the same rate. We strongly recommend a constant water method.

Be careful not to keep plants too wet, since the only way crown rot can get to your plant is if there is a waterway for the spores to swim in. Constantly moist does not mean soaking wet.

SECRET #3 – HUMIDITY: Along with even moisture around the soil ball, violets will bloom better if there is also sufficient moisture in the air. Again, the tiny buds will dry off very easily when humidity is scarce, and open blossoms will fade more quickly if the air is dry. Drafts of dry air seem to be especially hard on blossoms and buds.

Growers in the Arizona desert find that it is impossible to bring violets into bloom without a constant water method that also allows water to evaporate into the air around the plant. And, don’t forget that desert like interior conditions often prevail while we are heating our homes during the cold winter months. Wicking

or capillary matting are both systems which will increase the amount of humidity around the plant as they also provide water to the roots.

If you live in an area where humidity is constantly high, you will probably prefer a watering system that does not add to the humidity. If the violets aren't blooming in high humidity, there is probably some other problem.

SECRET #4 – Fertilizer: Starving violets cannot afford to waste energy on blossoming. Because violets grow indoors at near -constant year -round temperatures and often (when under fluorescent lights) at constant light levels, they also have a constant hunger for nutrients. The plant functions will only perform at peak levels when the plant is nourished. Therefore, violets need to be fertilized regularly.

There are many excellent violet fertilizers available, but our favorites are the ones which give directions for use with every watering. Very few people are good at remembering when the last fertilized if they only do it monthly! These fertilizers are commonly mixed at a rate of ¼ teaspoon per gallon of water and used with every watering. These can be used in constant water systems also, but if the system allows for evaporation, mix the fertilizer at a weaker strength (perhaps 1/8 tsp. Per gallon) to avoid concentration.

Many growers prefer violet fertilizers that have a high phosphorous level, the middle of the three numbers on a fertilizer package. The phosphorous is said to strengthen roots and thus lead to greater bloom. Healthy roots are critical to blooming!

Some growers like to rotate different brands of fertilizers. We have found one that suits our water very well and use it constantly. (It is no secret formula and we 'll tell you which brand it is if you ask, but we don't want to advertise for any product in this column.) If your violets bloom well with a specific formula, we suggest you don't mess with success!

SECRET #5 – Soil Texture : Healthy violet roots can only grow in potting mixtures that do not inhibit development. Violet soils should produce an environment for the roots that is approximately 1/3 water, 1/3 solids, and 1/3 air. This requires choosing and mixing a soil that will not absorb too much water and will permit a lot of air to surround the roots at all times.

Dr. Charles Cole, in one of his speeches to a nearby violet group, pointed out that when a violet is removed from its pot the roots are often found all around the outside of the soil ball with little or no root development in the center of the soil. It is his belief that the roots were developing where there was air, in the narrow space between the soil and the pot.

Adding water and solids to the mix is easy, but how do you add air? The secret is to use light perlite or vermiculite, which cannot pack together tightly, in combination with high quality peat moss (brown in color). Every successful grower has a favorite recipe which suits their growing conditions, so it may take some experimenting. Try to mix a soil that will not become packed down as time goes on. A good soil should be so loose that a grower can push a finger through the soil all the way to the bottom of the pot, months after the plant is potted there.

SECRET #6 – TEMPERATURE, pH and POT SIZE: This sounds like three secrets, but they all relate to healthy roots. Temperature extremes, pH levels that are away from the recommended standard of around 6.8, and over-sized pots can cause roots to deteriorate.

Violet roots prefer to remain within a temperature range of about 65 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit. Colder nighttime temperatures can cause roots to die back. Higher temperatures will affect leaf growth and often cause blossoms to deteriorate, too.

Fertilizers will not help if the soil pH is unbalanced, because the plant can only access or use nutrients within a narrow range of pH. If you have been fertilizing, but the plants appear sickly, check the pH.

Over-sized pots can cause real problems for roots, because the violet root ball will only grow to about 1/3 the span of the leaves. If the plant has reached its maximum adult size, the roots cannot fill a pot that is larger than the ratio of 1/3 of the leaf span. For example, a mature plant with a 12 inch leaf span will have a root system that is about 4 inches across. If it is placed in a 6 -inch pot, there will be an inch of soil all around the root ball that has no roots in it. It is very easy to keep this "empty" soil too wet, which leads to other problems. The exception is the large show size varieties, which when given bigger pots, grow to very large mature diameters.

SECRET #7 – NO BUGS, NO FUNGUS: There are several insects and fungi which can keep plants from blooming, or cause blossoms to fade too quickly. Thrips live primarily on the blossom, inside the yellow

pollen sacs. They are small, but definitely visible, especially when they move across the blossom after being disturbed by a probing finger or a puff of air.

Soil mealy bugs sap the strength of the entire plant as they feed on roots. These pests, because they live in the soil, can be tricky to spot. Of course, plants under such attack will not burst forth with bouquets of flowers!

Cyclamen mites are impossible to see with the naked eye, but experienced growers quickly recognize their presence when blossoms become small and distorted and center foliage becomes hard and tight.

Powdery mildew is probably the most common fungus to affect African violets. It looks like flour on the surface of the blossoms and leaves. Mildew is most commonly found growing when air is not moving and is humid.

A less common fungus is blossom blight which actually appears inside the blossoms and almost seems to strip away the color of the blossoms.

All of these require immediate attention, not just to promote blossoms, but to protect the health and very life of an entire African violet collection.

SECRET #8 – THE GENETICS: Some violets don't bloom because it isn't in their genes. Some violets bloom wildly in the worst of situations. The genetic make-up of a violet hybrid has a lot to do with its ability to bloom and the way in which it blooms. Some bloom occasionally; some keep a few blossoms up most of the time; some burst into heavy bloom on regular intervals. Some almost never bloom at all. If everything else is correct, culturally speaking, and your violet refuses to bloom, it may be genetically at fault. We would throw it away.

Choose new plants carefully and ask questions about plants' ability to bloom. Most violet growers are very willing to suggest plants that bloom especially well. We all love those plants the best.

HAPPY VIOLETS DON'T KEEP SECRETS: Happy violets will bloom. If conditions around your plants are properly maintained, your violets can be happily blooming most of the time. They brag to anyone who sees them that they are owned by a really good violet grower!

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