

African Violets: Care Tips for Everyone

1. Be very careful not to overwater African violets. This is probably the single most common cause of damage to the plants. Rather than watering them on a set schedule, water whenever the soil begins to dry out. You can water saintpaulias either from the top or the bottom. If applying water from the top, be careful not to allow droplets to saturate the leaves, causing unsightly spots. When watering from the bottom in saucers or trays, be sure not to leave the plants sitting in water for long periods. Water should be at room temperature.

2. Light levels should be good but not strong. In the wintertime, African violets can withstand full sun if they are shaded a bit. But in the summer, they should be put in full sun only in the early morning or late afternoon. During the rest of the day, the plants should be well shaded from direct sunlight. African violets usually do well under artificial light, but if lights are kept on at night, remember that the plants require about 8 hours of darkness to rest.

3. Ideal temperatures for African violets range from 60° to 65°F at night to 75° to 80° during the day. Air circulation should be good but not drafty.

4. Humidity generally should be kept fairly high, which shouldn't present many

problems in your shop but may be difficult to achieve in the home. One way to raise relative humidity in the home is to stand the pot on a bed of pebbles in a tray of water. Evaporation does the rest. Care should be taken with this method, however, to keep the water level in the tray below the bottom of the pot. Otherwise, roots may rot.

5. Frequent fertilizing of African violets is a good way to maintain their health. Probably the easiest way to fertilize the plants is to dissolve a bit of plant food in the water before watering them. Be sure not to fertilize when the soil is too dry, however. Instead, water the violets until they recover from any wilting, then fertilize.

6. Use a porous soil, preferably one mixed especially for African violets. This will allow water to drain well and will facilitate oxygen reaching the roots. Pots should not be too large for the plant, but should be large enough to encourage the development of an adequate root system.

7. To encourage blooming, make sure the plant has enough light. You can tell if light levels are correct by examining the leaves and stems. Too little light will cause the stems to lengthen as they stretch for more. Too much light will tend to result in short stems and bent leaves.

How to Propagate New African Violets

1. Cut a leaf from a mature plant, selecting one near the center of the plant, not from the bottom row. Cut leaves should be in good condition, not wilted.

2. Cut the stem to a length of 1 to 1½ inches and allow it to dry out for an hour or two.

3. Insert the leaf 1 inch deep into perlite or vermiculite, wet and wrap in a plastic bag.

Keep the bag partially sealed to let in some light. Put the leaf in low light.

4. When young plants appear, fertilize lightly with dilute plant food and allow to grow until each has four leaves.

5. Carefully separate the young plants from the mature leaf and plant in proper soil mixes in small pots. —C.J.S.