



## African Violets

### At a Glance

**Temperature:** above 65 degrees F at night; prefers 70-80 degrees; water should be lukewarm

**Light:** 2-4 hours of morning & afternoon sun; will not bloom in insufficient light; limit amount of direct sunlight

**Water:** only when needed with lukewarm water, avoiding leaves and crown

**Fertilizer:** use all-purpose 20-20-20 fertilizer at half-strength only when plant is actively growing; if soil is dry, water first before fertilizing

**African violets** are one of the few true flowering houseplants, and will bud and bloom indoors practically year-round.

This native of Africa is a very tolerant plant, which make it a relatively low maintenance houseplant. This plant thrives on neglect, needing only a warm and bright location and water when it wilts with dryness. The most common killer of these plants is overwatering, largely due to their low moisture needs.

Violets come in a wide variety of colors and leaf forms. There are even miniatures that will grow in a shot glass. Some varieties are variegated (leaves streaked with white or yellow) and some will trail over the edges of their pots.

In the wild, this plant is found in the foothills up to 7,000 feet in the Tropical Eastern African Mountains near Tanzania in partially-shaded areas amongst trees. African Violets thrive where the temperature is warm, 68 to 77 degrees F. with little

night temperature fluctuation.

This plant was discovered in the late 19th century by Baron Walter von St Paul. It belongs to the large Gesneriaceae family which includes achimenes, gloxinia and streptocarpus. In the 1920s, interest in this plant came to California, and new varieties made it very popular. In the 60s, Hermann Holtkamp made the African Violet a household name.

**Violets have four basic needs: Warmth, bright light, little water and fertilizer**

### Temperature

Keep warm- above 65 degrees F night temperature, 70 to 80 degrees F during the day if possible. Try to use only tepid or lukewarm water when watering. They don't like cold feet. Keep away from cold drafts, especially doors leading outside.

### Light is a vital ingredient

African Violets are particularly sensitive to the quality of light available and will perform best if the light intensity is sufficient. Violets require 2 to 4 hours of morning or afternoon sunlight. If they don't receive enough light, they may appear healthy, but will not produce flowers. Conversely, too much direct sun will cause reddish yellow leaves and spindly flowers. Just the right amount of sun will render large, dark green leaves with lots of flower buds.

### Top or bottom watering?

There are people who feel that violets should be watered from the top to avoid accumulation of salts, while others swear by bottom watering, alleging that top watering flushes out the plant's nutrients. Each argument has its merits.



The truth is that either method will work. What really matters is that the water is supplied only when the plant needs it, and that the soil in the pot is given a thorough soaking. If top watering is practiced, care should be taken to avoid getting water on the leaves or the crown of the plant. Cold water splashed on the leaves may cause yellow/brown spots or white streaks on the leaves. If the crown becomes wet, dry it out quickly or it may start to rot. Warm water splashed on a leaf will cause no damage, but if wet leaves are exposed to sunlight, it may cause sunburn. The safest way to water is to use a watering can that has a long, slender spout that can be pointed under the leaves, allowing the room temperature water to be poured directly on the soil. If the soil has dried completely, the water may not penetrate the soil and run right off. If this happens, add one teaspoon liquid dish detergent to about one gallon of water and submerge the pot and let sit for a few minutes.

Bottom watering can be simpler and helps to revive a thoroughly dried-out plant. Fill a sink to a depth of two inches with warm (not hot) water and set the violet in the water. Let sit until bubbles stop forming on the surface (about 10 minutes). Then remove from its bath, drain off excess water and return to its saucer or pot cover. This may be time consuming if you have a lot of these plants. For this reason, violet collectors often water their plants via the saucers in which they stand or use self-watering pots. However, these plants are not water-loving plants and do not like to have cold wet feet. The key is not to allow the plants to sit in water for an extended amount of time. Make sure the soil dries out completely before watering. Allowing the plant to wilt before watering will not hurt the plant, but may cause premature bud or flower drop.

### **When to feed?**

When your violet is growing vigorously, feed it with an all-purpose 20-20-20 fertilizer, about every other time you water (only during active growth). It's best to mix at half the strength recommended by the manufacturer. Especially if the soil is bone dry, water the plant first with plain water **before** fertilizing.

### **Humidity**

In Tanzania, not only is the temperature very warm, but the air is very humid. Here in our dry, arid homes (especially in the winter) we may need to increase the humidity by using a pebble tray or grouping multiple plants together. It should be noted, however, that many people who have violets in their home find no need to provide extra humidity. These plants are far more robust than often given credit, and grow in a satisfactory way standing in a dry saucer or pot-cover. High humidity is not absolutely vital to the life of the violet, but too much humidity and insufficient airflow can cause powdery mildew. Spray with a fungicide or baking powder to remove fungus.