

African Violets

A guide to growing and caring for African violets indoors



At a Glance

Temperature: above 65° F at night; likes 70-80° during the day.

Light: 2-4 hours morning or afternoon sun; needs sufficient light to bloom; limit direct sun.

Water: Only when needed; check soil for moisture before watering.

Fertilizer: All purpose, half strength 20-20-20; only while actively growing; If soil is dry, water 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 relatively low maintenance houseplant. They need only a warm and bright location and water when it wilts with dryness. Their most common downfall is overwatering.

Violets come in a wide variety of colors and leaf forms. There are even miniature varieties. Some are variegated 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 among trees. African violets thrive where the temperature is warm, 68 to 77° F with little night temperature fluctuation.

Temperature

Keep above 65° F at night and 70 to 80° during the day if possible. Try to use only tepid or lukewarm water when watering. Keep away from cold drafts, especially doors leading outside.

Light is Vital

African violets are particularly sensitive to the quality of light available. They 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 many flower buds.

Watering - Top or Bottom?

Some 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 with a long, slender spout that can be directed under the leaves, allowing the room temperature water to be poured directly on the soil.

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 it 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 can 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 sit in water for extended periods. Make sure the soil dries out completely before watering. That said, allowing the plant to wilt before watering will not hurt the plant, but may cause premature bud or flower drop.

Fertilizer

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 with plain water before fertilizing, as fertilizer may burn completely dry roots.

Humidity

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. If necessary, spray with a fungicide or baking powder to remove fungus.