



African Violets: Easy-to-Care-for Flowering Houseplants

**By Sarah Preiss-Farzanegan
UCCE El Dorado Master Gardener**

I like to think that the purpose of the African violet plant is to bolster my ego. I am very capable of growing lovely flowering and fruiting plants in a variety of outdoor settings, flower beds, raised beds and containers, for example. I was, however, completely incapable of successfully nurturing houseplants until I discovered the African violet.

The genus *Saintpaulia* contains several different species of perennial flowering plants that are native to eastern Africa and thus commonly known as African violets. They are known for their longevity as indoor plants, beautiful (and varied) colored blooms that can appear at any time of year and their fuzzy textured leaves. They can reach many different sizes, though most commonly plants are six to ten inches; perfectly sized to perch on a well-lit living room shelf or kitchen breakfast counter. If you follow a few simple rules, you, too can foster a robust collection of beautiful African violets!

African violets flourish in a tropical environment. So in your home, you need to keep them watered (a weekly watering schedule works best) and surround them with humidity. To create a cozy humid climate around the pot, set the pot in a dish of stones and water; the water should not be accessible to the plant's roots. When watering an African violet from the top, try to keep the leaves dry and when watering from the bottom, do not allow the plant or pot to sit in water for more than two hours. Either watering method is fine. They require potting soil that retains moisture, yet drains well because they are very susceptible to problems like gray mold, which can affect both the leaves and flowers of the plant.

To keep your African violet looking healthy, prune off spent blooms and shriveling lower leaves. Use a fertilizer that is specific to African violets and apply diluted in water as directed. African violets require good light, though they should be protected from direct sunlight. They actually grow very well in rooms with fluorescent lighting (I have one in my office too)!

African violets are relatively easy to start from leaf cuttings. Take a mature leaf with the stem and root in either water or potting soil in a 4-inch pot; be sure to keep the leaf dry if rooting in water. When several plants crowd the pot, separate them into their own 4-inch pots until the leaves reach over the rim; then plant in a six-inch pot and you have your very own mature African violet!

I think my favorite aspect of the African violet is its constancy. With its basic needs taken care of and accompanied by a well-chosen decorative pot, it will bring color and life to any indoor space.

There will be no Master Gardener public education class this Saturday – have a Happy and safe Fourth of July celebration!

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.