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The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

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Our endless summer is drawing to a close and I no longer have to worry about the temperature in my plant room getting too hot. During the summer I am busy monitoring both temperature and humidity least the temperature get too high (I take some action if it's over 32 degrees Celsius) or the humidity be too low (Under 35% is a worry). Now, though we have come to a really good time where everything is quite OK. That probably won't last more than another few weeks though and we'll go to cooler temperatures where I'll be worrying about things getting a bit too cool over-night.

In other respects things are looking up too.

I have done a lot of work with my African violets. I have repotted and groomed, but of course there is more to be done. As you would know if you grow anything there is always some little job to do. Still, they are starting to look good. It doesn't take all that long for a plant to grow well.

This time I haven't made the mistake of letting too many flowers come up before the plants are mature enough. There are always demands for plants for show and sale but I have decided my own requirements come first, for once. Most of the flowering plants I have at the moment are minis and semi-minis. But the others will come!

It may be a while before my shelves again look like this photograph which was taken some years ago. Yes, a while; but it will happen.



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It's Shocking



Ever caught sight of one of your African violets in the corner of your eye, and thought “I didn’t know that one was variegated”?

This has happened to me from time to time. The punch line is that it isn’t a new variegated African violet at all. It is just one that has produced a lot of marks on the leaves. What are these marks and why are they present?

They are shock marks, areas of the leaf where the chlorophyll has disappeared because of some difficulty in the growing conditions.



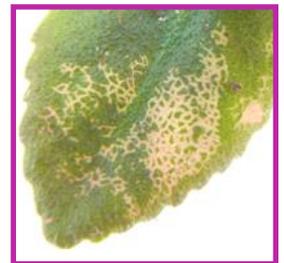
What causes shock marks to happen?

For me it mostly happens to plants that have been repotted, especially if they have been repotted when it is cold. I try to avoid repotting in cold conditions, but then I recently found that it is also possible shock marks will occur when potting is done when it is very hot. I had never noticed this before.

Some African violet varieties seem to be more prone to shock marking than others. That is something you will get to know about a plant after you have owned it for a while.

Simply slipping a plant into a slightly larger pot without disturbing the roots rarely causes a problem. Where you do radical surgery they are most at risk.

Watering with really cold water may cause shock. I imagine that watering with unnecessarily hot water would have the same effect.



Can I remove the marks? Maybe more fertiliser?

As far as I have experienced it, the damage to the leaves is permanent. Giving more fertiliser, especially nitrogen fertiliser might be expected to make the green come back, but sadly it doesn’t seem to happen.



So what to do with these plants?

The only thing to do is to remove the damaged leaves and let the others grow out. We are fortunate indeed that African violets are fast growing and it won’t be too many months before such plants are once again thriving with a full complement of green leaves.

The best cure is, of course, prevention. Even so, it is so easy to find that shock marks happen.

See what happened to me! But don’t they look better once I have removed the damaged leaves?



A Footnote on Shock Marks

Recently I had a tray of four plants that I had taken to a show to be used as demonstration material and then given away to interested visitors. These four were not used so they came home. They did need to be repotted.

Several days later I finally got around to dealing with the plants. Two needed to be moved to larger pots, one had a number of side-shoots (suckers) to be removed, and the other was a semi-miniature that needed to have lots of old leaves removed and the roots trimmed to let it grow on again.

My normal practice is to put newly potted plants into a tray with a small amount of water in the bottom to gently wet them. I don't put them on their water/fertiliser solution until they have had time to settle in their pots. Unfortunately I am starting to run out of space, so the tray was perched in a rather unsatisfactory position.

That was very foolish because a week later I managed to knock the whole tray to the floor. Fortunately the plants stayed more or less in their pots although a lot of leaves were damaged.

The next day I removed a lot of broken leaves and put them properly into their pots once more. But, Oh dear, as I still hadn't organised a proper space for them, I put the tray back in the same spot. (I'm not really sure why I'm admitting all this!)



Anyway, you will have guessed what happened next. I knocked the poor plants over again four or five days later. This time they slid down the wall while staying just partly in their pots. Once again I removed most of the damaged leaves, brushed them off and settled them back this time in fresh pots. Yes, I did manage to put them in a secure place this time.

The photograph at left shows what they look like now.

They are all much smaller than they were. There are a number of cracked and damaged leaves that will be removed as the plants grow bigger. And, last of all, I

was interested to note that the plant on the top left of the photo has a couple of shock marks on the leaves. As far as I can remember after this travail, those marks weren't there to start with. I'm not surprised, mind you. I was pretty shocked myself by the whole thing, to say nothing of cleaning the floor and the wall!

Another few months of growing and careful grooming and these should be satisfactory looking plants once again. There are few situations from which you cannot recover with African violets.

It may be that the lesson from all this is that African violets are really tough plants and can put up with an awful lot of abuse! Just look at the way the one on the bottom left (Its name is 'Secret Love') has opened a flower despite its trauma.

Is this Fertiliser Burn?



Well, perhaps. But on the other hand, perhaps not.

Fertiliser burn can look just like this. It occurs when the excess fertiliser salts in the potting mix or water is drawn up and deposited on the leaves. Quite often, though, fertiliser burn shows itself by the leaves of the plant wilting because the fine roots have been damaged by the excess fertiliser.



In this case I think it is not fertiliser burn but salts from the potting mix that have caused the trouble. Such salts are often found in the peat moss that we use as part of the potting mix.

Just have a look at the close-up photograph. You can see there is a brownish deposit and that it is mainly on the hairs at this stage. I think the brown colour is a give-away. It is much more the colour of peat than of my fertiliser.

How often does this problem show up and what is the end result?

It is most common after the plant has been repotted. That is, when there is a smaller root system than the size of the pot. It is exacerbated if the mix is kept too moist when the plant is in this active growing phase..



If the deposit of crystals is allowed to accumulate and remain on the leaves they will be damaged. Just as if they were fertiliser salts, this deposit is acid and will actually burn the leaves. The plant at left shows damaged leaves where this has been allowed to happen.



What can be done?

The only thing to do is to leach the plant and actually wash the leaves. The leaching is simple. Just pour luke-warm water through the potting mix until it is running freely from the drain holes.

Washing should be done more cautiously. I just let luke warm water run over the centre leaves

while I rub them gently with my finger. It is important not to damage the leaf or disarrange the hairs on it more than you can help. See the next photo for the cleaned plant.

The final photo shows that the problem reappeared in two weeks. I repeated the treatment and so far it seems to be growing out with minimum damage.



Annual Show of the Hunter Valley African Violet Society



To a dedicated grower of African violets there is no better way of spending a day, or even several days at an African violet show. On 1st May I was at the show held by the Hunter Valley African Violet Society. It was only a one day show, and wasn't judged, but was just lovely despite anyway.

I didn't take photographs of individual African violets, but I looked at them all several times over. For me, it's as much about the overall impression of colour and lushness that tables filled with flowering plants produces. There were also a large number of beautiful photographic entries of African violets and their cousins. That was also worthy of much examination.

There was a sale table, of course, with some really interesting offerings. I managed to confine my acquisitive instincts and only brought home eight leaves. I now have them happily growing on my shelves and will be potting out the plantlets in due course. Mostly they were violets that I have grown in the past and would like now to have in my collection again.

But the best thing of all about going to a show is the other enthusiasts that you meet and talk to there. There is always plenty to talk about!

So, if there is a show to be held near you, or even a little way away, do go. African violet growers are amongst the friendliest in the world. I know. I have been befriended in many places, myself.

Variegated African Violet Leaves

Recently I was repotting some semi-miniature African violets and found I needed to remove several leaves from a variegated plant. Some of these were very heavily variegated indeed, but that just seems to make them more beautiful to look at. I didn't like the idea of tossing them out.

So I found a little terracotta vase and some dark red flowers as a foil for the pale, delicate leaves.

Looked good to me. Nice decoration on the corner of my desk for a short while.



A Favourite Violet

One of my long term favourites is Rob's Dust Storm. I have grown it since the mid 1990s. That's around 20 years. It isn't exactly a heritage violet, but it's certainly not new.

It has a pink flower with fantasy markings. Often the markings are smaller but more even. I really like this variation, though.

The official description goes: Double bright pink pansy/ blue fantasy. Dark green, pointed, serrated. Semiminiature, R. Robinson.

I wouldn't want to be without it.



An African Violet Should Be Repotted Regularly

Why? To keep the plant fresh and growing strongly. Repotting if done correctly, works in the following ways:

- It accommodates the increasing size of a growing plant until a pot of around 100 mm (4 inches) across is reached.
- It replaces compacted potting mix by repotting a mature plant into the same size pot with fresh mix. This should be done after removing old leaves and pruning the roots. It will make sure the plant can grow strongly. If the mix is hard and filled with roots, the plant will have a hard time taking up nutrient.
- It will ensure that an old plant with a "neck" where leaves were removed as they declined during the life of the plant is completely renovated. When an African violet has a "neck" the repotting is done so that the lowest leaves are around about the top of the mix once again.
- It will avoid salt build-up on the top of the mix and the rim of the pot as shown in the photograph. This deposit as in the photo can end up damaging the leaves and petioles that may rest on it.



In short there is nothing like regular repotting to stimulate an African violet to grow strongly and rapidly. Fast growth is usually healthy growth.

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