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The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

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Kent Stork—a Salute to His Memory

On 30 April 2017 the African violet world lost one of its truly bright lights. The hybridiser Kent Stork died at only 66 years of age.

I can do no better than to quote from his obituary: *“Kent taught for one year in Lexington Public Schools before becoming a florist. As he left, his pastor gave him an African violet. It died within two months, but it changed the course of his life. He researched and soon mastered growing and hybridizing African violets. He opened Kent’s Flowers, in October of 1977 in Arlington, specializing in African violets. In 2002, the couple began writing a column for beginning growers in the African Violet Magazine which led to the book You Can Grow African Violets published in 2007 by the African Violet Society of America.*

“In 1990, Kent opened a second store in Fremont, Nebraska, later closing the original location. The business closed in August of 2016, after 39 years of operation.”

There are no less than 160 Stork hybrids in “First Class”. I find that I have grown around 30 of them, probably the majority of those that were imported into Australia. All were great plants that I really enjoyed.

I have included a few photographs at right of just four of the plants I have grown. At the top are ‘Omaha Thunder’ (red) and ‘Silent Prayer’ (lavender). Below are ‘I Feel Pretty’ (pink & white) and ‘Rapid Transit’ (blue with white edge). There are so many more I could include— ‘Arapahoe’, ‘Pow Wow’, ‘Smooch Me’ and ‘Marching Band’ come to mind. All plants I have loved in their time.

But if you are looking for a good red violet, do remember ‘Buffalo Hunt’. This is a truly great plant and a consistent show winner.



A Passion for Purple

My first ever African violet had purple flowers.

Well purple to me. A blueish purple to be sure. It was an unnamed Rhapsodie and I thought of it as a violet coloured violet. Thus purple. It really epitomised what an African violet should be as far as I was concerned. Particularly when you consider how well the stamens and their pollen sacs stand out against the purple background.



On the whole we African violet growers have some difficulty in working out which colour is purple and which is blue and there is little agreement. Yes, of course, the hybridisers describe their plants in terms that should make this easy, but it is my opinion that some hybridisers experience some of the same difficulties. There are charts that define colours but mostly we don't consult them.



And then there are the differences that are created by photography and lighting. Accurate rendition of colour is what we would always hope for from photographs of flowers, but so often we get it wrong. But no matter what, purple and its adjacent bluish colours always signify real African violets to me.

Some of my all-time favourite African violets have purple flowers. And that brings me to one that I am particularly thinking about at the moment – Corroboree. The description in First Class is “Single dark purple frilled pansy. Dark green pointed scalloped (foliage)”. It is a hybrid from Margaret Taylor. So, yes – definitely purple. The flower photographed at the top of this page is “Corroboree”. It is a version of the photograph that was used on the cover of my book “African Violets for Everyone”.



I actually started to grow it when it was very new indeed. The hybridiser brought the seedling (fully developed in flower) along to a meeting that I attended. It was an immediate hit. Our President at that time said something like – if you are going to ask for a leaf you will have to wait – I'm first! Indeed many of us ended up with a leaf to take home and cherish and I have grown Corroboree ever since.

Above are two more photographs of Corroboree. The top one was taken by me of my plant. The one on the bottom was taken by Heinz Dornbusch of Margaret Taylor's own plant at the African Violet Association of Australia's show in 2015. This plant was awarded Best Standard African violet.

Is it just another purple flowered African violet? Well, no, it is much more than that. It is a great performer that doesn't seem to mind quite hot or quite cool conditions. It flowers early and heavily and needs minimal attention from the grower to form a good even shape. The leaves are strong and a dark green. It does grow large, but then who can argue with something big and eye catching?

So what is the point of this story? What I would like to say is this: Please don't discount a plant because you feel that its flower has a colour or shape that is "ordinary" or "common". There are so many characteristics to enjoy in any plant – ease of cultivation and ready production of flowers, for instance. And, of course, to me the very purple flowers that some might not favour are what ensures that Corroboree has a sure place in my collection.

The colours at the top of the previous page grade from purple on the left to blue on the right. I don't know how one can pick the point where purple changes to blue. Can you do it? And even then what happens with a flower that has variations of the colour in its petals? Note that my three photographs of Corroboree have colour differences—probably caused by the lighting—or my photography.



Weird things they do . . .

When you plant a leaf to propagate a couple more plantlets of a particular variety, you expect it to just produce plantlets. Normally anything from one to 15 or so, or so I always believe. And these plantlets should be produced from the cut edge of the left stalk.

But sometimes this isn't what happens. They just have a mind of their own. The leaf I photographed here decided it would like to put up flowers instead of plantlets.

This is 'Sky Garden' - a semidouble—double sky blue frilled star with a variable white edge. I recently reacquired it after a few years of being without it and I am really glad to have it in my collection again. So—having one large healthy plant I decided to propagate. No, I didn't need any more, but you know, "just in case".

And so what do I have—flowers only. Not a plantlet to be seen. There is actually a second flower stem coming up, also with several buds on it.

So what will I do now? I could cut the leaf off again and replant it to try again, but I think I will take a fresh leaf and start over.

This sort of thing is not unusual for anyone who does a fair bit of propagating. Sometimes you will find little plantlets growing out of the leaf stem well above the potting mix, even from the leaf veins. If the leaf stem is planted too long and too deeply in the pot I have even seen the plantlets coming from the drain holes. They are really anxious to grow and flower.

Recovering from a Plant Accident

A few days ago I had an email from someone who had a problem that involved an African violet that had been knocked over and fallen out of its pot. After being gently resettled it had deteriorated to some extent, presumably as a result of its adventure.

I didn't answer this immediately because as I had done enough for that day, so put it off until the next evening. In the meanwhile, next morning, I was doing a little work with my violets and – guess what? In reaching over one little violet to add a little water to another, I knocked one down and it fell on the floor. It came out of the pot and looked a bit of a mess. I was a bit startled by what I had done so I stepped aside in an involuntary way and managed to step on the plant. Fortunately not on the leaves, but on the roots instead. This little plant was now in real trouble.

Of course I put my water can away and picked up the poor little plant and temporarily popped it back in its pot, knowing that it needed some careful care if it was to survive. Thinking about my enquirer, I decided to take photographs of the plant and what I was doing to it. The first two photographs show the plant in the state it was when picked up and put back in the pot.

It was a quite nicely developed plant of Rob's Boogie Woogie, a variegated semiminiature with pink flowers. It is actually a great plant that has won many awards. Mine was obviously not going to win anything in its current condition. Nor was it going to continue growing well with its broken leaves and its squashed root system.

1. The first step was to remove the damaged leaves, and all the flowers and buds as they clearly would not survive since the roots were damaged.
2. I slipped the plant out of its pot again and removed as much potting mix as possible from the roots. I then trimmed them fairly short, being careful to get rid of any that were squashed or torn.
3. Next, more leaves had to be removed both to even the plant up as it was rather lop-sided at this point, and also to reduce the stress on the greatly reduced root system.



4. Having done that exposed rather a lot of bare stem above the roots. When replanted the bottom leaves should be just above the potting mix so therefore, that stem would be covered. To ensure it was able to produce roots into the fresh mix, I gently removed the stubs of all the leaves that had been removed. See the third photograph for this.

5. I got a clean 50 mm pot—this is a semiminiature and needs a small pot to help to keep it tiny. With a new wick and fresh potting mix the plant was settled into its home. I then sat the plant in a shallow saucer of water to moisten for the first time.

Note: I always use moist potting mix, but find the plant will be more likely to thrive if it is properly moistened straight away after potting. After half an hour or so, I emptied the water out of the saucer and have put the plant on the dry saucer for a day or two.

The end result is shown in the last photograph. The plant is only half the size and has no flowers and no buds at all. But there is an upside to this tale. Even though 'Rob's Boogie Woogie' is a variegated plant it had become all green in our recent very hot summer. There was just a little variegation starting to appear in the centre leaves. Now that I have repotted it, I expect it will grow fairly quickly and that in the cooler months to come it will be its beautiful variegated self again.

So it wasn't such a bad time to repot it. And with any luck it will be full of flowers in a few months.

I hope my enquirer is as lucky with her plant.

Carolina Elegant Affair



I have shown photographs of this plant before as it is one I really like.

I had just the one plant and thought I had better propagate, just in case. I planted up three little plantlets some time ago and have been waiting for them to grow.

Meanwhile, my original plant didn't like the hot summer. It has just now begun to flower well and is showing its white edge rather than just all pink. But the three plantlets—well!

They all have large white flowers with just a faint pink flush. I would think this was the effect of cool temperatures but it hasn't been all that cool.

I am pretty sure all three are sports. The fact that the leaves are paler too rather supports this. I may keep one to see how it turns out over time, but not all. I'll try propagating Carolina Elegant Affair again though. This is one plant I don't want to risk losing. Always good to have a backup.



Favourites of the Day

I have a couple of new favourite semiminiature African violets.

They are not new plants, by any means. They are just newly become favourites. I have been growing both of them for some time but only now have come to realise just what great plants they are.

Firstly, 'Rob's Puddy Cat'. That is to say, the plant pictured at right was sold to me under that name but there are some differences when I look at the description in First Class. It says "Double creamy white to light pink frilled. Dark green, quilted, serrated (foliage)" Mine as you see is much more a plain pink. I cannot help thinking it is really 'Ness' Feather Pink' whose flowers are described as "semidouble-double light pink frilled" which sounds more like. Whatever its name is it has been behaving impeccably growing to an even shape without any undue problem, and staying small. The whole package is just so pretty.



Secondly, 'Jolly Marvel'. This has been a real success for me. I entered it in the recent show of the Hunter Valley African Violet Society. I haven't been growing it very long, although it was registered in 2011. But what a darling plant it is. It is a Pittman hybrid and its description is "Single-semidouble coral ruffled pansy. Crown variegated medium cream and green."



It has certainly grown easily for me. I have been most impressed by the variegation which has remained constant through all our recent very hot summer, although it is not so apparent in the photograph. It has stayed small and compact all the time and the flowers came up at the time of the show with no effort. Now that's the sort of plant I like!

It actually had more flowers on it at the show, but some have died off since I brought it home. I was unable to photograph it immediately so I stored it in a clear, covered box as an isolation ward. It has now been stripped of its flowers and trimmed down to a smaller plant. I have repotted it and set it to grow again hoping it will reward me once more.

It is such a nuisance to have to isolate plants that have been to a show, but it seems to me to be the only way to make sure that I haven't brought home bugs as well as prizes. Killing pests is one thing but avoiding them completely is even better!

The Hunter Valley African Violet Society Show



The Hunter Valley African Violet Society had its 2017 Show on the weekend of 6 & 7 of May. I mentioned it in the last issue of The African Violet Way. If you were not able to attend you missed a treat.

Last year because of venue problems the Society held a one day only unjudged show. While that was delightful, it was good to see that this year, a two day show with full judging was even better.



I was unable to spend very much time admiring the show but I was able to take some photographs not long after the show opened. Once again, as has happened before, the camera I had with me was really not adequate for the job, but I have put a few photos at left.

The standard African violets were excellent in both number and quality. There was a profusion of different “other” Gesneriads and even the photographic section was well supported. If anything the miniature African violets and trailing African violets were a lesser delight—but that is being picky and I am probably relating to the plants I have seen at this show in other years.



The Best in Show was ‘Buckeye Cranberry Sparkler’, a lovely plant. Unfortunately I did not have good photos of it or the other major winners—but not only the winners are worthy of admiration. There were so many beautiful flowers.

The bottom line is that all shows are worth seeing. It doesn’t matter whether you have entered plants or not, you will still enjoy the show. So many new things to put on your list, so many plants to buy, so many friends to make and so much to learn.



Show time is always a happy time.

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