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# The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

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It seems like it's back to the future for me again. So many plants I have had in the past but they have had to go to make way for others. Now when I see a treasure from a few years ago I try to get it.

At a meeting of the Hunter Valley African Violet Society recently (See photographs of their Annual Show on p3). I was able to get some leaves of some old friends, thanks to the generosity of fellow members.

Two such plants that I haven't had for a long time are 'Ness' Blueberry Puff' and 'Smooch Me'.

'Ness' Blueberry Puff' (right) is described as 'Semidouble dark blue pansy/pink fantasy. Dark green glossy, scalloped/red back'.

At the top of the page is 'Smooch Me', a Kent Stork hybrid. It's description is "Single-semidouble rose-pink pansy/variable red eye. Dark green, quilted glossy serrated".

I'm glad to have them both again as they are great growers. One decision I have to make—what has to go to make space?



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## More about coir – sorry if I'm boring you!

Over the recent weeks I have watched plants grow and flower, I have read more and talked to more people. I still am not entirely sure about using coir. I have created a number of trial potting mixes and have potted up plants to grow, having kept some of each mix for the necessary potting on when due. Since experience has shown that plants in a coir mix may do fine initially, only to falter after 2,3 or even up to 8 months later, I will not have any results until October or November this year. And then it isn't conclusive as only a really large scale trial could be.

Let's look back at the reasons for using coir to replace the peat in potting mixes for our African violets.

1. Convenience of not having to store large quantities of peat moss.
2. Easy availability of coir bricks at hardware stores nationwide.
3. Inexpensive, at \$2.00 approximately for a brick
4. Fewer problems with fungus or pests
5. So as not to further deplete the world's peat bogs. In other words – environmentally friendly.

Having looked at my own plant results and the comments of others, I have to conclude that the easily purchased coir bricks from the hardware store is not a satisfactory proposition. If bricks are not going to give a good result, obviously I need to trial the more expensive loose (bagged) product. I know others have already done this but I decided to give it a try.

The idea of coir being inexpensive is something I can compare. So having done plenty of internet research and telephoning, I then bought a bale of Canadian sphagnum peat moss and a 50 litre bag of coir. Obviously I could only shop within a reasonable distance of home, and although products from further away could be delivered the cost would be prohibitive.

Here is what the costs of these items works out at:

- Coir bricks that can be easily purchased in most places in Australia cost \$2.05 and are said to make up to 9 litres each when reconstituted. **This is a cost of approximately 22.7c per litre.**
- Bagged coir already washed, buffered and pH stabilised comes at various prices, some brands having a very high price indeed. The best buy I could find cost me \$20 for 50 litres, or **40c per litre**
- Sphagnum peat moss I can purchase online – Lithuanian \$66 for 200 litres, (**33c per litre** plus delivery costs) I was able to buy Canadian 220 litres for \$50 locally. **Approximately 22.7c per litre.** This is in line with what I believe it is available for in Sydney.

In other words, the “cheap” coir bricks cost (almost) exactly the same per litre as the best peat moss. The “better” bagged product coir costs almost twice as much per litre for the very best buy.

Naturally price and availability will vary from place to place, but for me at least the idea of coir being a cheap alternative is not in line with the facts.

## Hunter Valley African Violet Show May 2018



*As usual the show was full of interest to anyone enjoying African violets and their relatives—to say nothing of making friends with their growers.*

*Here are a few photographs showing the major award winners at the show.*

*Top left—Best in Show and Best Standard was Jays' Flossy.*

*Top right—Best Trailer was Jays' Icecastle.*

*Above left—Best Gesneriad, Strep-tocarpus ketaniesis x Matthew*

*Above right—Waterdancer—Best Novice plant*

*Right—Ness' Firefly sport*

*The lower two photos are of my personal favourite from the show. If you have grown Margaret Taylor's hybrid Oracle, you may know that Duo is a sport from it. Duo is a*

*chimera with a red and white flower.*

*Now the sport—Duo, has sported—to a leaf chimera but with the original flowers of Oracle.*

*And what is more, since the show two other growers have said they have the same sport!*



## Taffeta Petticoats Adventures

Quite a long time ago now I talked about 'Taffeta Petticoats' in these pages. It is a cultivar I had grown over a long while and always enjoyed. It looked like the photo on the right.

My plant at the time I originally wrote about it seemed to have gone into a decline and just would not recover. To my great pleasure I was later given a plantlet to grow.

I grew it and also reported that the plant turned out not to be able to make up its mind what it wanted to do. Just about every flower on it was different. Some white with a coloured centre, others white with a dark edge and so on. It seemed to me pretty well impossible to propagate from because—well, where do you start. Which flower?

So eventually I cut the centre out of the plant to let it produce some shoots so I could grow from them. It only produced four little shoots and the first of them has come into flower. And I think it is just beautiful. The photograph does not do it justice I fear. The pink is lighter and a slightly different tone from that of the original Taffeta Petticoats. The centres of the flowers are a definite strong dark red. Some flowers have a tendency to look like chimeras.

I have now removed all the flowers and put the plant in a larger pot to really see what it can do. But before I did I had it on the table alongside a plant of Cherry Brandy, which is a splendid dark red double. I enjoyed the colour combination so much I couldn't resist putting them together for another photo.

There is every chance that the grower who gave me the plant is reading this. If so, she should start thinking of names, because I think this should have a name. Of course I still have three little plants to flower. Judging from their mother all could be quite different.

The lesson here is don't discard a plant just because it is not absolutely according to the description given in First Class. African violet growers have always thrived on plants that just wanted to be a little bit different!

*Footnote:* Now another grower tells me she has a plant, sport of Taffeta Petticoats, the same as mine from the same source. Aren't African violets wonderful? Something new to discover every day!



## How long does it take to grow a violet from leaf?

I thought I knew the answer, but perhaps it might be worthwhile to just follow one leaf that was planted to see how long before I have a flowering plant. The time of year, the temperature, the actual cultivar and other factors will have an influence.

The variety is 'Corroboree' a Margaret Taylor hybrid with lovely dark blue/purple flowers. It is a good vigorous plant and thus a good reliable subject.

The leaf was planted on 14 March 2018. The weather was still very hot at that time. To propagate, I use a small pot of normal African violet potting mix.

I did not take a photograph of this leaf as I prepared and planted it, but include here a photo of a similar leaf I recently planted. (Photo 1.) Some people plant leaves in a perlite/vermiculite mix. Some people even put them in water. It probably makes no difference to the leaf. It's just a matter of what works better for you.

I prepared it by cutting the stem down to only 2 cm in length and cut on a slant to encourage the plantlets to form at the front of the leaf. I do not use anything to prop the leaf upright as I believe the light should fall on the leaf blade and as I am growing them under artificial lights, the light source is above.

Photo 2 was taken on 8 May. There is still no sign of plantlets, the little bit of green is just algae forming on a couple of pieces of perlite. But if you look carefully, you might be able to see the mix is actually bulging upwards. Ah ha! Plantlets are forming under the surface.

Photo 3 was taken on 15 May, one week later and the first tiny leaves are appearing. This was nine weeks after the leaf was planted. If planted in September when the weather is warming rather than cooling, I have regularly had plantlets appear in less than six weeks from planting.

Photo 4 (29 May) shows considerable increase in size of the plantlets. The weather is now much cooler overnight. Therefore, although my plant room does not get all that cold, the outside weather does have an influence. I expect that growth might be slower from here on.

But let's wait and see. I will take photos as progress is made and report in the next issue of The African Violet Way. How long until there are flowers? That's to be discovered. I always think of doing this as a reason to get up in the morning.



## How much light does an African violet need?

This is always a teasing problem: one to which there is no true answer. It is almost as difficult to answer as “How often should you water an African violet?” There are as many answers as there are African violets I imagine. All sorts of factors alter the answer.

Whenever asked I routinely answer “Your African violet needs to be placed in the brightest place in your home just short of direct afternoon sun”. Straightaway there is a problem. That answer is fine where I live but might need rethinking in high latitudes where the hours of daylight are less in winter but considerably greater in summer. And what about in almost more arid regions or in lower latitudes where any sun at all will be all too scalding.

Light varies according to the seasons both in duration and strength. The direction it shines in windows and how far it reaches also varies. You really can't just find a spot and think it is right forever. I have seen it written that African violets “like” morning sun and that they prefer light from the east. Well, I can tell you that I have grown African violets at windows at all points of the compass and I think that so long as the light is diffused while being sufficiently bright for a satisfactory number of hours there is no problem at all.

And we must remember that some African violets need more light than others. I like to grow miniatures and semiminiatures in more light than standards, for instance.

Of course a scientific answer can be given. This will usually be a light level that will be fine for most African violets.

So, exactly how much? According to the Optimara website, African violets need bright to moderately bright indirect light. They say that the correct luminosity for African Violets is 10,000 to 12,000 lux, or about 900 to 1100 foot candles.

And how do you work this out? Use your camera light meter if you have one. If not, you can download apps for both Iphone and Android that work as photographic light meters. Some are free but even where not this is still a cheaper option than a specific photographic light meter which can be quite expensive.

Well, yes, but what if you really don't want to become too scientific about this? I recently saw this article entitled ‘Shadow Test for Houseplants’, by Larry Hodgson (aka The Laidback Gardener). <https://laidbackgardener.blog/tag/shadow-test-for-houseplants/>. It shows you how evaluate the light in a particular spot by looking at a shadow. I feel that African violets need what he calls “bright light”, ideally for 10 or more hours per day.

For me, the ideal way of determining whether the light is “right” is to let the plant tell you. How they behave is a dead giveaway. See the photographs on the next page.

When all is said and done, our plants just have to deal with whatever light is available for you to use.

Not only is the brightness of the light and the duration of the light important for flowering African violets, but the daily variation from light period to dark period is considered important

in encouraging growth and flowering.

Of course, you can decide to avoid the vagaries of the seasons. You can grow with artificial lights. But that's another subject.

A lot of very useful information on this subject can be accessed at the Optimara website, at <https://www.optimara.com/africanvioletcare1.html#anchor374075>

As a matter of fact, my musings on light have come about as I have decided that it might be time to change from using fluorescent lights to the newer and more economical LED lights. A whole different subject, as I say.

***Here are two plants giving their opinion on the subject of light.***

Both are the same variety, and until two and a half weeks before this photo was taken looked very much the same and were growing side-by-side under fluorescent lights. At that time I took one of them and put it in my spare room.

Can you see which is the one not getting enough light? Of course you can. The one with too little light has developed a very "upwards" look to it. It is, as we say, "reaching for the light". It has not taken very long for it to make its preference clear. If it is left there any longer any new leaves that grow will have long and weak stems, no flowers will develop, and it will begin to lean towards the window.



So what is wrong with the position in which it has been growing? We all know you can grow good plants by natural light. See the second photo



There are several problems. Firstly the window blind is never raised more than 30 cm. Secondly the large bulky items each side of the plant are shielding it and their dark colour is absorbing light instead of reflecting it onto the plant. The plant is actually a little bit below the window sill. There is another window in the room but it is too far away be useful. And lastly, although you can't tell from the photo, the window is overhung by several large trees.

Taken together these things mean the position is not at present suitable for growing African violets. And the plant is telling me so!

Let's see what happens to the plant if it is put back under the lights for a while. Next time.

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