

The African Violet Way

An E-Newsletter by Ruth Coulson

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How to choose an African violet

If you are building up a collection of African violets or trying to whittle a present collection down to a smaller number of plants, you may want to make the collection one that really reflects your tastes. You need to think about some options in making your selection.

It's a matter of what you prefer:

- Big and gorgeous plants that make a statement, or small and more refined?
- Plants suitable for showing, or something always in flower for your personal enjoyment?
- Large fantastic flowers or smaller flowers in larger quantity?
- Plain colours or fantasy/bicolour/edged or fantastic combinations of colour
- Chimera violets (either flower or leaf) or those that can more readily be propagated from leaf?
- Dark rich colour flowers, pale delicate ones, bright happy ones?
- Which colours in particular appeal – blues, purples, reds, pinks, white, yellow/green?
- Green foliage or variegated?
- Plain leaves or quilted, ruffled, girl?

Don't know? Like them all? That's OK, I don't know the answer either. Many of us just go ahead on the principle "That's so pretty, I must have it"!

As an addendum to that: I challenge you to list the violets you would keep if you were only allowed to keep 20 (or make it 10 if that suits your circumstances better). Virtually impossible. I have tried this. My list keeps changing every time I think about it!

My main problem is I am caught between deciding whether I should try to think of one indispensable plant in each colour, or do I just go for 20 that I think are really pretty, 20 newish hybrids, perhaps or maybe 20 tried and trusted old friends.



Lyon's Early Spring - Just too gorgeous not to grow!

The (Further) Story of Happy Trails



Some of the plants of Happy Trails that I have had over the years.



I know I have written about one of my very most favourite plants, Happy Trails, before, but here I am again. Sorry if it is too much of the one thing, but bear with me because I have a reason for going over some of the same material.

The thing is I have been growing this variety for 39 years, as clearly as I can remember. Yes, I know that's a long time, and yes, I am old! But the plant has been good to me, it has grown easily, I have won a number of top awards with it and so I have always kept one on the shelf. Just as an old friend, really!

The plant I had two and a half years or more ago had grown a bit old and floppy. The stems at the base weren't as strong as I would like so I elected to discard the plant but kept a number of the tops as cuttings for propagation. Normally I would only keep two – one plant to grow and the other for back-up. But at the time I was experimenting with various potting mixes. In particular, potting mix using coir as a possible replacement for peat and those simply using high grade peat moss. So I had a use for numerous plants of the same age and variety so they could be compared.

Amongst other trials, I planted four tip cuttings of Happy Trails in each of two seedling punnets – one of which had a peat based mix and the other had the coir based mix. I also planted two cuttings separately in my normal way in my normal mix to grow on and keep. As time went on I decided that the coir based mix was not for me as those plants did not do as well, across all the different varieties I was trialing.

So, what to do with the spare plants from the trial? In most cases I just slipped them out of their pots, removed most of the potting mix and repotted into a new mix that I am finding satisfactory. But keeping in mind I already had two plants of Happy Trails growing, I didn't really need another eight plantlets.

I found I had this beautiful piecrust edged bowl (with drainage hole) that wasn't in use. I have had some success in growing trailers multiplanted in large bowls in the past and thought I should try it again.

The bowl is fairly large (**measure**) so I decided it could easily accommodate all eight plantlets. The roots of all the plantlets looked good, so I didn't remove the potting mix they were growing in so as not to disturb them. I just divided them up, and



planted the peat moss mix ones on one side of the bowl and the coir mix ones on the other. Not removing the potting mix proved to be a serious mistake. I had leached the pots very thoroughly before planting and leached again a few weeks after. Some months later I was quite surprised to find that the type of growth produced by the two different types of mix was continuing even though the plants have now been leached a number of times and the rest of the bowl was filled with a good potting mix.

Looking at the first two photos on this page, you can see how the plants on one side of the bowl (bottom right in both views) are more compact, have smaller leaves and are not flowering. They are the ones originating in the coir mix. The others, sturdier, larger leaves, longer internodes and with some flowers are the ones in the peat based mix. They are growing the way Happy Trails has always grown for me in the past. These were the ways in which the plantlets were growing before I potted them into the bowl.



Now there is nothing wrong with the idea of smaller and more compact. In fact that is what is often wanted in a trailer. It is just different and the difference is made more obvious because they are in the same pot. We often talk of the changes that might well take place in a plant because of growing conditions. The only different growing condition here is some residual potting mix on the roots but the difference in appearance is obvious.



Obviously it was not ideal for the planting to look like this, so, hoping to improve it, I pruned each crown around six weeks ago. Not as radically as I might if I had been trying to produce a show plant when I would have removed each stem down to around 20 – 30 mm long and probably taken all the leaves off at the same time. In this case I just reduced each stem by around half. I left the leaves on the remaining stems. When you do this, what happens is that a whole lot of new growth occurs, making many more crowns for the plant. This will mean the plant has a much fuller appearance and much more flowering potential.



The third photo shows the plant when this has been partly done. And the fourth photo shows the amount of growth and old leaves that had already been removed.



As the new growth appears it will gradually take over. The old leaves that had been left will be removed at this stage and in fact it needs doing at the moment. If I am lucky and am able to look after the plant properly from now on I hope I will have something beautiful to display on the glass shelves in my very bright foyer.

With the two original plantlets that I kept I did try hard to grow well. I was able to keep one growing evenly without any of the periods of distraction that have plagued me over recent years. I tip pruned it regularly. This is a necessity with Happy Trails. It otherwise can become too lanky and rather open. I find that keeping it regularly groomed and tipped gives a nice shape and even sized leaves. And of course the many crowns that result from doing this provide lots of flowers.



When the AVAA show came around in October last year it was one plant that I thought worth entering. This photo was taken a couple of weeks before the show. There were some flowers and many buds as you may be able to see. At show time a lot more buds had opened and to my surprise the plant won a major award. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to stay at the show and couldn't photograph it at its moment of glory.

Anyway all of this does tend to prove that Happy Trails is still a good plant and can compete with any of the more recent hybrids. I guess it will settle in here once again to grow for many more years yet.

Please Note

If exhibiting trailers it is required to have only one central plant from which all the branches grow out. It can have as many crowns as it can conveniently carry, but only one central plant.

In most cases you cannot show African violets in decorative containers like this one. Since this planting was intended just as a pretty item for home decoration it doesn't matter.

When should you repot African violets?

I love questions like this. There are so many facets to the question, and so many possible answers. Here are a few.

- The quick and easy answer is **“When they fill the pots with roots,”** but that's not everything that is involved.

First of all, let us look at why you would repot. Two things straight away come to mind.

Firstly because when you repot the plant you stimulate it to grow. This is highly desirable because all the flowers come from the nodes of the leaves. When new leaves grow from the centre of the plant, you are providing places from which flowers can come in the future.

And secondly, because if a plant has its roots really tight in the pot it may be fine for a little while, but eventually it will deteriorate. The moisture and fertilizer may not be taken up by the roots as well as it should be, no matter what sort of watering regime you follow. The plant will gradually show its displeasure by having yellowing outside leaves, the centre leaves, if they

grow, will be smaller than they should be, and the flowering will drop right off. If the plant is in this condition it is a good bet that the potting mix holds a lot of “left-over” fertilizer salts which are difficult to leach away when it is so tight in the pot.

So, therefore, as I just said, you should repot when the plant has filled the pot with roots. Sometimes you can just slip the root ball into a new pot and surround it with fresh potting mix. This would be with a young plant whose roots have only just filled the pot. You will thus be able to keep it growing in a healthy condition with no hitch in growth, hopefully with lots of flowers to follow. With an older plant, if the pot is really filled with roots then it is in too small a pot and should be potted up, or it needs to be rejuvenated and replaced in another pot the same size or even smaller. In that case you would need to tease out the roots removing some of the old potting mix before replanting in fresh mix. Probably you would want to remove leaves as well to freshen up the plant entirely.

So that is one answer. Here is another.

- **“Repot once a year when conditions are warm.”** We often give new growers this sort of advice. Of course this varies according to your climate and what sort of temperature control you have in your plant growing area indoors. I believe that in really tropical conditions it may be preferable to repot in winter when conditions are mild. Often spring is considered the ideal time. The newly repotted plant will have the warm summer months in which it can grow and flower. The corollary, of course, is “Don’t repot in the middle of winter, unless your conditions are consistently warm”. You decide.

Another answer, more from a negative perspective –

- **Don’t repot when temperatures are very high** (say more than 30 degrees C.) **or when temperatures are very cool** (say below 16 degrees C.). If you do, you risk shock marks on the leaves and a slow and poor recovery from potting. Worst case? The plant may die.

And from a practical aspect –

- **“Repot when time and energy allow”.** I am following this one myself at the moment on the grounds that my plants are lucky to have any attention at all and they had better be grateful. I am fostering that gratitude, which will be visible in healthy growth and eventually flowers, by keeping them warm as much as possible. After all it is the middle of winter. Variegated plants I am leaving alone for the time being, but for the others I am trying to keep them individually cared for by covering them for the first few weeks in some sort of terrarium container. I have many options for doing this and I feel it is only necessary to do it for a short while.

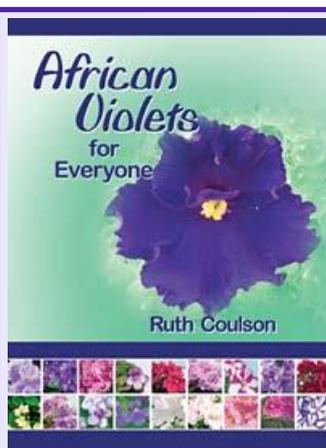
I am also endeavoring to keep my plant room as warm as possible. I run the lights I use at night rather than during the day so that the warmth from them will help heat the room. This is only possible because I haven’t gone over to many LED lights as yet. When I do, as they do not give off so much heat, being more efficient, I will need to use some sort of heater, just overnight for the few coolest months.

If I am still trying to catch up with repotting my plants in the summer (I certainly hope to have

finished before then!), I will just do as I usually do in any case – try to keep the temperatures down (turning off lights if necessary) and humidity up, with a small humidifier that I have bought.

So rounding that up: You should replot your African violets when they signal that they are ready by filling the pots with roots, when the season is right, when the temperature is right and in any case at least once a year. Or, in necessity, when you find you can. If the right time for the plant coincides with the right time for the grower, that is a happy circumstance indeed.

To get the maximum from your African violets you may well want to replot more frequently, especially with miniature and semiminatures and with plants being grown for exhibition.



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Edge of Darkness: Blossom—Semidouble dark purple star/frilled white edge. Foliage—variegated green and ivory, serrated/red back. (Paul Sorano/Lyndon Lyon Greenhouse. 2014)

And Something Beautiful to Finish . . .

This is 'Edge of Darkness'.

The colour is most deliciously dark and with the crisp white edges to the petals it is so appealing.

And yet, I find it the most difficult of all colours to photograph. If you are interested in having some photos of your plants, for a lasting record, you should try with this one.

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