PLANT LIFE COLUMN

AFRICAN VIOLETS

The African violet (Saitpaulia) is a very popular houseplant because of its delicate appearance, small size and ability to flower under the low-light conditions found in homes. It is available in many different varieties and colors and can be propagated easily, making it an excellent interior decoration.

African violets will do best when placed in a window that has bright, indirect light, but they can be grown for long periods of time in lower light levels. When natural light is insufficient, fluorescent lamps can be used.

It is sometimes possible to tell by their appearance if African violets are receiving too much or too little. If light levels are too low, the leaves of the plants will be thinner and deeper in color. The plants will grow well under these conditions but will flower less, if at all.

Too much light can cause African violets to have yellow or spotted leaves. Growth will be slower and plants will be compact. Flowering will continue for awhile but eventually decrease because of the loss of chlorophyll in the plant.

Having proper drainage is important for the survival of African violets. They need a well-drained soil mixture. Special soil mixtures are available, but it is easy to create your own. Mix equal amounts of soil, sphagnum peat and perlite. The soil mixture should have a pH between 6.0 and 6.5. Clay or plastic pots can be used. Decorative glazed pots without drainage holes are not recommended.

Soil and pots should be sterilized before they are used so that disease, insects and weed seeds do not inhibit growth. Commercially prepared soil mixtures are usually sterilized, and so are new sphagnum moss and perlite. Soil and old clay pots can be sterilized by placing them, slightly moist, in an oven heated to 180°F for 30 minutes. Plastic containers should be sterilized by washing them thoroughly with soap and water or a dilute Clorox solution.

There is no fixed watering schedule for African violets. Each plant's watering needs are determined by the type of pot used, soil mixture, drainage, light and temperature. Plants in clay pots and brighter light usually need to be watered more frequently than plants in plastic pots and low-light levels. The best way to determine if plants need water is to feel the surface of the soil. If the soil feels dry, apply water. Be sure to water before the soil becomes hard or the plant wilts.

African violets can be watered from the top or from the bottom. If watering from the top, make sure the soil is saturated. Be careful not to get water on the leaves. Cold water on the leaves can cause them to spot. You can help eliminate spotting by using warmer water or watering from the bottom. Place the flowerpot in a container and add about one inch of water. The water will be absorbed through the bottom of the pot. When the soil surface becomes moist, remove the pot and pour out the excess water. Use a houseplant fertilizer that is labeled for African violets and follow the directions on the package.

Propagating African violets is easy. Taking leaf cuttings is the most popular method, and flowering plants can be produced in six to nine months. Remove any healthy, firm leaves from the parent plant and trim the petiole to about 1 to 1½ inches in length. Using a soil mix suitable for African violets, push the petiole in a hole made with a pencil. Roots should appear in three to four weeks and new plants will emerge in six to eight weeks.

African violets are beautiful houseplants that can put color in any room. Just give them enough light - natural or artificial - and water and food, and they should provide you with years of enjoyment.
Free classes

Creative Gardening classes have begun. "Butterfly Gardening" is scheduled for Thursday, and "Water Gardening," is scheduled for Nov. 8. Classes will meet at TECO, Room 7-I, on Simpson Road in Kissimmee. There is no charge. Call the Osceola County Extension Service at, (321) 697-3000 for more information.

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