

## Flowers, Plants and Things

### **The African Violet**

by  
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*Saintpaulia ionantha*. What a strange name for so popular, so beautiful a plant. Actually it does have meaning. It was named after a German Baron, Walter von Saint-Illaire, who discovered the plant on his travels to East Africa.

While constantly popular since it's introduction to the United States in the 1920's, that popularity has gone through peaks and valleys, highs and lows over the years. We seem to be at the beginning of a resurgence in popularity. Is it because of all the new varieties and color combinations or the many articles in gardening magazines or, as I suspect, because they are so readily available at outlets such as Lowe's and Home Depot?

Or, is it because that the first plants brought over from Africa were blue? That was the color. Blue. Then came a period of hybridization all during the 1940's through the '60's that gave us a full range of colors from the whites, through pinks and purples and back to blue. And, from the early 80's until today, a constant flow of new varieties that are easier to grow, bloom more frequently, have fringes on the flowers and variegated leaves.

Whatever the reason, they ARE popular. A small investment can bring big returns and many hours of enjoyment. A small pot, warmth and high humidity are all that are required to be successful.

And light, yes the proper light. For years we have known that the African Violet thrives in low light. That is what the literature tells us. But what is "low?" Too many of us place them on the kitchen counter, under the cabinets, away from the window. That is not low light; that is darkness. While violets will not tolerate being right next to west or south window, they like more light than we give them here in Central, New York. We

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are in one of the lowest light areas of the United States. We live in a very low light situation. A couple of feet away from that window, or in an east window, the plants will thrive.

Violets thrive in the typical American household because they do best at temperature ranges from 60 to 80 degrees F. Be careful, though. The temperature on that window sill may be too, too, warm because of the radiator beneath it. And, our violet will not stand the cold from a window that leaks a lot of cold air.

Watering is easy, too. Fill a soup bowl with water, about an inch, and stand the plant in it for about a half hour; no longer. Remove, let it drain and put it back where ever you had it. Sitting in water too long, will kill the fine root hairs that actually drink up the water, causing damage. Too often, when we see a plant wilting, we water it again, not realizing that the reason for the wilt was not lack of water, but damage to the root system.

Every two weeks or so, add fertilizer to the water in the soup bowl. There are many of them on the market. Just follow the instructions. A final tip about watering; do it from the bottom as described above. Never water from the top.

Increasing your collection is easy. As several rosettes form within the pot as the plant gets older, simply excise them out as starter plants.

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*Carmen Cosentino operates Cosentino's Florist with his wife Anne Marie. He was elected to the National Floriculture Hall of Fame in 1998 and in 2008 received the Tommy Bright award for lifetime achievements in floral education.*

