

WHY WON'T MY AFRICAN VIOLETS BLOOM?

By Pat Addison

When you first bought your African violet it was probably blooming. That's the reason you bought it, and it's frustrating if it won't flower again. Well, blooming your plant is easy, you just need to give it what it needs. African violets will bloom almost constantly under the right conditions.

Ask yourself the following questions, and decide whether you need to make any changes.

Is my plant getting enough light?

If you're growing your plant in natural light, it's probably not blooming right now because of our short winter days. As daylight increases in February, you should start seeing buds. In the winter, give your African violets all the light you can. If you want blooms year around, you can supplement with a fluorescent light fixture. Hang it 10 to 12 inches above your plants.

African violets need bright light, but direct afternoon sunshine can burn them. They will take a little direct sunshine in the morning or evening, so an east or west window would be perfect. North windows are usually too dark in Alaska. A south window will get too hot, and by March the leaves of my plants burned in my south window.

You also need to consider how much light is coming in the window. There could be trees or a building blocking the light. Or, the neighbor's house could reflect extra light into your windows. Test the light by placing your hand between the light source and the plant; if your hand casts a defined shadow, the light should be okay.

Is my plant too dry or too wet?

African violets like to be evenly moist. They prefer not to dry out and should never sit for days in a saucer of water. The soil should be kept damp, but not soggy. If the pot seems light when held in your hand, it is probably time to water. Stick your finger in the soil to feel for moisture. Water when needed, not when it is convenient.

Is my plant too cold or too hot?

African violets like the same temperatures we do; 60 to 80 degrees is ideal. In the winter, remember it might be 65 at the thermostat, but 55 next to the window.

Does my plant need more fertilizer?

Use a bloom booster type fertilizer. These will have a higher middle number, which is phosphorus. I use Peters African violet food, which is 12-36-14. Use only ¼ tsp. per gallon every time you water. This will provide your plant with regular constant fertilizer.

Is my plant healthy?

First bring it to the kitchen sink and give it a luke-warm shower. That's right, it's okay to get the leaves wet. Use the sprayer and gently rinse away dust and dirt. Two things to remember now: Don't put it in back in direct sunshine; this will cause spots. And don't let water set in the center crown of the plant; water in the crown could rot your plant. Use a paper towel to dab it out.

Now that it's clean, take a good look at your plant. Are the leaves fresh and green? If not, remove any old, yellow or limp leaves, and any old bloom stalks, too. Remove enough leaves to form a symmetrical plant.

Does my plant need repotting?

You should repot your plant every year. Spring is the perfect time! Because of the peat in most potting mixes, the mix breaks down and becomes too acid with time. Fertilizer salts and minerals in the water begin to accumulate in the pot. Your plant needs fresh potting mix!

Use a light potting mix. If you buy the prepackaged African violet mix, you still need to add perlite and vermiculite! A good basic mix is 1 part peat-based potting mix, 1 part perlite, and 1 part vermiculite. I like to add ½ cup horticultural charcoal and 4 Tbs Super Sweet dolomite lime per gallon of my finished mix. Make sure your potting mix is predominantly Canadian peat. This is the good stuff. If you are using one of the self-watering containers for African violets, you need to use an even lighter mix. I use 2 parts peat based potting mix, 2 parts perlite, and 1 part vermiculite.

A common mistake is to overpot an African violet. They don't have very large root systems, and African violets like to be a little pot-bound. If you have too much soggy soil around the roots, they will rot and succumb to fungus and bacteria. A good rule is that the plant should be three times the diameter of the pot. So a 4" pot is large enough for a 12" plant!

When repotting your African violet, never press the potting mix into the pot. Simply fill the mix around the roots, and tap the pot on the table to settle the mix.

African violets should be grown with only one crown. If you have multiple crowns or sucker plants growing from the main crown, you need to remove them. The extra crowns can be rooted in a pot of their own. Cover them in a plastic bag until they root. It will take about one month, and you'll have plants to share!

For more information call the Aurora Borealis African Violet Society at 562-0547 or check out my web site at www.plantsonpurpose.com.