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The right stuff for African violet success

By Nancy Crowe

For years, I avoided the African violets that haunted grocery and home improvement store entrances. Experience had proven I did not have the mojo required to care for them. Enough plant loss and heartbreak.

Then my spouse presented me with a beautiful African violet from McNamara at Sand Point. I looked at its deep purple blooms and lush leaves. Track record be damned. This plant was not only going to survive but thrive.

Getting an African violet from a good nursery, and not the drafty doorway of a big-box store, was the first key to changing my luck. Here's how I took it from there... with additional tips from fellow Purdue Master Gardener Mary Lou Hutter, who's given presentations on African violets.

The first thing I did was research African violet pots. I ended up choosing a wick watering pot; it sits on top of a water reservoir, with a wick drawing a water/fertilizer solution into the soil as needed. At least that's the theory.

The African violet did indeed thrive for two years. Then it looked a bit gangly and the lower leaves drooped. I consulted fellow gardeners and the African Violet Society of America's information-packed website.

The diagnosis: My plant needed a new pot. The irony: This was both a sign of success and an opportunity for next-level failure. So I found a larger wick watering pot, said a prayer and prepped for surgery.

When I removed the African violet from the pot, I was shocked to discover two things. First, a "sucker" had grown from the original plant, so I essentially had two plants to repot. Second, the soil was sopping wet from the wick constantly being in water.

After a careful division, I repotted the original plant in the

larger pot. The spinoff (sounds nicer than sucker, doesn't it?) went into the old pot. As my sources suggested, I removed several lower leaves before repotting. Hutter recommends having only about four rows of leaves on the plant.

For both, I used fresh African violet potting medium mixed with peat and perlite for better drainage. Getting rid of the wicks improved drainage even more. I swapped the reservoirs for saucers.

In the five years since then, I've watered weekly with an African violet fertilizer solution. African violets tend to like being watered from the bottom, so I put a little water in the saucer and remove any that's still there after 10 or 15 minutes. However, I do sometimes water the soil, being careful not to get the leaves wet; spots can form.

"The most important thing is, you don't want to overwater," said Hutter. She's had success with a soil moisture meter, which has a sensor you insert into the soil and a dial indicating how dry (or wet) the soil is.

With both plants freshly potted, I now had to deal with the pile of lower leaves I'd trimmed off as part of the repotting operation. I potted up some in small pots, made a humidity tent with a clear plastic bag and put them on a heated mat designed to help cuttings root and seedlings germinate.

Then came the waiting... and once the repotted and freshly divided African violets realized the trauma they'd undergone, the drooping.

What had I done?

Give them time, fellow gardeners urged.

I checked the cuttings daily, watering just enough to keep the soil moist. From previous experience with cuttings, I knew some would root and some would not. "Could at least one or two of you please make it?" I

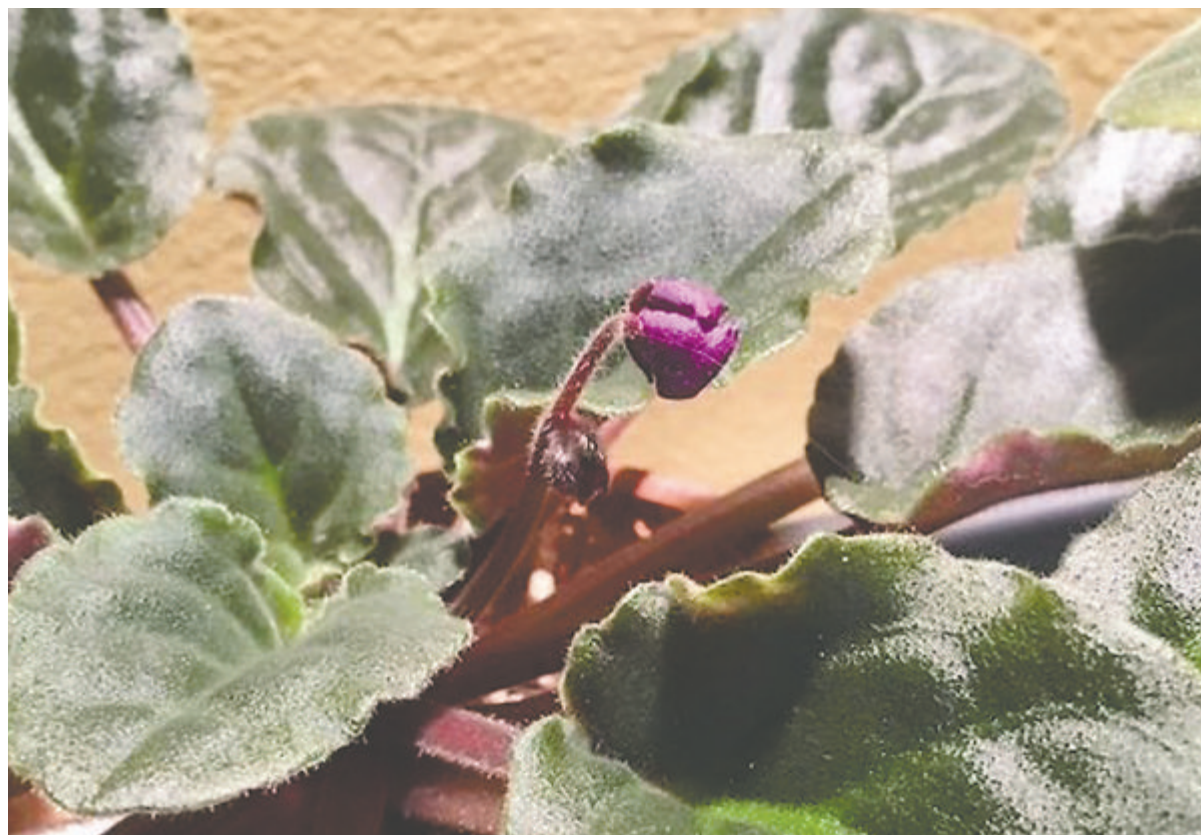


Photo by Nancy Crowe

Four years after I propagated the plant from a leaf cutting, this African violet began to bloom.

whispered, glancing over at their dejected elders.

In a few weeks, both plants perked up and the original bloomed again. The spinoff took longer to rebound, but bloomed as well.

Four months after the repotting/propagation operation, a little leaf pushed up through the soil at the base of one of the potted leaves. A few other cuttings followed suit.

Once they became full-fledged plants, I gave some as gifts, including one to my friend Geri. Under her care, it bloomed abundantly and needed a new pot within a year.

It also won Best of Show in the adult House Plants: Propagated Potted Plant category at the 2018 Allen County 4-H Fair.



If you love African violets but have had no luck with them, try:

- Getting the plant from a reputable local nursery.
- Watering weekly with African violet fertilizer solution; Hutter suggests a fertilizer with a middle number (phosphorus) of at least 14.
- Consulting sources such as your local Master Gardeners or the African Violet Society of America (avsa.org).

Good sourcing and a little help from our friends can do wonders for your luck.

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