

## CULTIVATING THOUGHTS

# Light, soil issues can affect African violet flowering

**Question:** I have an African violet that was beautiful when I purchased it. I have had it for several years, but in the last couple of years it has not flowered, it keeps getting brown spots on its leaves, and it is losing a lot of leaves. It is almost half the size it was about a year ago. What am I doing wrong?

**Answer:** African violets are one of the most popular houseplants and for good reason. They thrive in conditions that are common in most homes. If the proper environment is maintained, these plants will provide continuous blooms with minimal care.

They originated in the ancient Usambara Mountains of Kenya and Tanzania, which provided an oasis of humidity and dampness in an otherwise dry region. It is the disappearing humid and shady conditions of this area that were home to the African violet (*Saintpaulia ionantha*) and its hybrids, a member of the Gesneriad family (Gesneriaceae). The genus name honors the 16th century Swiss naturalist Conrad Gessner, the father of modern zoology and a botanist, with the species name being Greek for violet. Baron Walter von St. Paul found them in the late 18th century while in West Africa. Baron was an amateur botanist who collected and sent the seeds to his father in Germany. His father gave them



**BELINDA CHESTER**

to his friend and director of Berlin's Royal Botanic Garden, Herman Wendland. It is he who identified this as a "new" genus, and named it after its discoverer. It is not a violet at all, as the family indicates, but was called this since it looks similar to one. African violets became a household item when a nursery in Los Angeles, in 1927, began releasing several hybrids which were then sold through Woolworth and Co. throughout the country.

If your African violet has stopped blooming the first consideration should be the amount of light it receives on a daily basis. These plants are called "photo accumulators." Before they will bloom they must receive the required quantity of light. Because they are understory plants in their native environment they require bright light but never full sun. If you are not sure if your plant is getting enough light, its appearance may give you some clues. If there is insufficient light the leaves are usually thin and deep green and are stretching toward the light source. They will continue to grow but flowering will be poor. Too much light

produces leaves that are pale or yellowish-green. You may also notice some areas of the leaves are a darker green where they have been shaded by upper leaves. In these conditions the plant will slow its growth and become very compact.

Flowering will also begin to decrease. If your plant is receiving insufficient light artificial sources can be used to supplement. Your plants should be placed twelve inches below fluorescent lights for 12 to 16 hours a day.

As an African violet grows older, the lower leaves die and need to be removed. When several leaves have been removed the plant begins to look stemmy and unattractive. They are ready to be repotted when the stem is more than two inches long. To repot your plant, cut off the stem at the soil surface, and trim it to two inches. Scrape the stalk with a clean knife to remove the tough outer surface. This will help to encourage root formation. Allow the stem to dry for approximately twenty to thirty minutes. The plant should then be potted in African violet potting soil, which is slightly acidic. Gently firm the soil around the stem and water well. The pot should be one-third the diameter of the plant. Usually a four-inch pot is adequate. African violets grow best when nighttime temperatures are around 60 degrees and daytime

temperatures are no more than eighty to eighty five degrees.

If your plant's leaves are turning yellow, your plant is most likely suffering from a nutrient deficiency. It is difficult to discern whether the deficiency is caused from a lack of fertilizing or a pH imbalance. Correct soil pH is vital for the health of your African violet. If the soil pH is not between 5.8 and 6.2, your plant will not be able to absorb the nutrients that are present in the soil. Using a potting mix specific to African violets, not watering with soft water, and not over-fertilizing your plants will help overcome most soil pH problems.

Your plants should also be on a regular fertilizing schedule. There are several water soluble fertilizers made specifically for African violets. Growers suggest fertilizing each time you water at a quarter strength of the recommended rate. The plant's soil should be moist before application and all water and fertilizer solution that runs out the bottom of the pot should be discarded. African violets are tropical plants and are sensitive to water extremes. Water at either extreme will produce rings on the leaves. Allow your water to sit out overnight to bring it to room temperature as well as allowing the chlorine in the water to dissipate. If managed correctly your plant should produce three flushes of blooms a

year.

For more information on African violets you can contact your local extension office. Atlantic County residents can contact 609-625-0056.

We have made some of our home horticulture/Master Gardener educational classes open to the public in 2020! 9 a.m. to noon Tuesdays at the Rutgers Cooperative Extension Office in Mays Landing. A \$25 nonrefundable registration fee per class is required. You must register and pay in advance.

Contact Ania Wagner, program assistant, at 609-625-0056 or email [Ania@acelink.org](mailto:Ania@acelink.org) for a calendar of available classes and more information. Want to make a difference in your community? Sign up for the 2020 Rutgers

Environmental Stewards Program hosted at the ACUA. The program helps nonscientists learn about the environment and become equipped with knowledge and skills to solve real environmental issues. Classes take place every Tuesday, starting Jan. 28 through June and are held from 4 to 7 p.m. Register at [acua.com/stewards](http://acua.com/stewards). Join us for an in-depth look at how to compost Feb. 21-22 and become a Master Composter. You'll learn how it works, what you'll need to do it, and how to get the most out of your composting efforts. No prior experience needed!



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The African violet originated in the ancient Usambara Mountains of Kenya and Tanzania. It is not a violet at all but was called this since it looks similar to one.

The program will be held from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. each day. The cost for the two-day class is \$50. The Master Composter program is offered in partnership with the Rutgers Cooperative Extension and the Atlantic County Utilities Authority. To register, see [acua.com/compost](http://acua.com/compost).

*Do you have a gardening related question you would like answered here? Please forward your questions to Belinda Chester, Master Gardener Program Coordinator, Rutgers Cooperative Extension Office, 6260 Old Harding Highway, Mays Landing, NJ 08330.*