



African Violets

I used to think of African Violets as 'old lady' plants. I've learned enough now, though, to see why they could appeal to people of all ages. There are eight flower types and eight foliage types telling me that there 64 different possibilities right there. They range in size from micro miniature (less than 3") to large (more than 16") and come in a wide range of colors, creating nearly limitless possibilities.

They were first discovered in the late 1800s in (guess where...) Africa. Two years later, they were introduced to the US by a florist in New York. The conditions here being much different than Africa, they did not flourish until 1938 with the invention of the fluorescent lightbulb.

As this infers, light conditions are important to the success of African Violets. It should be indirect but bright. Reasonable success can be achieved on a windowsill facing the right direction, but artificial light provides more control allowing for better growth habit and bloom. The African Violet Society of America also notes that they need eight hours of darkness to bloom.

Another very important factor is watering. Water thoroughly with tepid water when slightly dry. Watering from the bottom, using a wick, sounds to be the most effective. Watering from the top now and then (with tepid water) will rinse off dust and debris. Watering is the preferred time to fertilize with a balanced fertilizer.

Very dry air is not good for African Violets or people. Some humidity is necessary for both of us though the plants tend to need more. Misting does nothing toward this end. A humidifier or a tray of stones with water almost to the top of the stones works well when the pots are set on top of the stones, not touching the water. Another way to control humidity is to plant in a terrarium or similar atmosphere. Air temperature should be between 65 and 85. Cooler temperatures will affect bloom and growth.

When planting, [pot size](#) does matter. Bagged potting mix with peat moss and vermiculite or perlite provides good texture, or you can make your own using similar ingredients. More information on this is provided on the websites. Homemade needs to be pasteurized (baked).

Propagation is easy. Remove a well-developed leaf cleanly at the stalk. Dust the stem (or not) with rooting powder and cover the stem about ½" deep with rooting medium

such as vermiculite. Don't let the leaf come in contact with the rooting medium. Cover your "nursery" with a plastic dome or wrap to keep the moisture in, keeping the plants damp but not wet. In about 2 months you should have plants big enough to pot.

For more detailed information on the history, light conditions, watering, planting mediums, propagation as well as pests, troubleshooting and more, [Missouri Botanical Garden](#) and [UVM](#) are excellent resources.

Some people are very serious about their African Violets, collecting and showing them. The [African Violet Society of America](#) can direct you to such activities as well as elaborate on the finer points of these showy plants.

The next meeting of the Haddam Garden Club will be on Wednesday, February 13 at the Community Center in Higganum.

Amy E. Sampson of [AES Landscape Designs](#) and instructor for the CT Nursery and Landscape Association's Annual Accreditation Program will present a program on creating outdoor rooms that will enhance the enjoyment of our yards. She is an experienced residential and commercial landscape designer and has created many attractive, functional and enjoyable landscapes and gardens throughout Connecticut and the Northeast.

This program is open to the public and will begin at 11:45. A \$5 donation is suggested.

A Few More Thoughts...

Houseplants in general:

Take care not to overwater and bathe them now and then to remove dust. They will look and feel better.

Don't fertilize until you see new growth. Neglect with respect.

Some plants experience leaf-drop as part of their life cycle but if it happens to you and you don't know why, call the Extension service. It could be insects, a virus, powdery mildew or environmental. Isolate any suspects until you identify the reason for their discontent so as not to contaminate others nearby.

Get your seeds ordered while the good varieties are still in stock. Don't be afraid to try something new if you have the inclination and space.

For a colorful breath of spring, check out the [CT Flower Show](#). It runs from Feb 21-24 at the Convention Center in Hartford.

This month's featured recipe from [Digging In](#), the cookbook by the Haddam Garden Club, is for Sicilian Olive Oil Cake submitted by Linda Rigono.

SICILIAN OLIVE OIL CAKE

3 eggs

1 cup sugar

Lemon and orange zest to taste

¼ cup milk

¾ cup extra virgin olive oil

1 ½ cups all-purpose flour

2 tsp baking powder

½ tsp salt

1/3 cup toasted slivered almonds

Confectioners' sugar

In a large bowl, mix together eggs, sugar and zests. Add milk and olive oil. Mix.

Mix flour, baking powder and salt. Add slowly to egg mixture. Mix well. Gently stir in almonds. Pour into an 8" x 8" greased cake pan. Bake at 350 on a cookie sheet for 30-35 minutes. Sprinkle with confectioners' sugar.