

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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African violets are a nice way to bring some color into an indoor plant collection. There is no secret to getting African violets to bloom; just provide simple conditions that produce good health.

Adequate light is essential. Without it, your violets will not bloom, and they will become “leggy”. Some homes or rooms have well-lighted windows that seem just right. Eastern exposure or indirect light of morning sun is best. Too much direct sun can damage leaves. Miniblinds or a thin curtain can help protect from direct sun rays. On dark, wintry days, reflective materials, such as foil could help create more foot-candles of light intensity.

Florescent lights in darker rooms may provide sufficient artificial light for some African violets to bloom. Some growers combine florescent and incandescent types of light.

For spectacular bloom, you might want to try some plant growth lights. Many free-standing units are available as packaged kits in hardware stores. Keep the lights on about twelve to fourteen hours.

Besides adequate light, humidity is necessary for healthy plants. Maybe the bathroom, kitchen, or laundry could qualify with fresh circulating air in warm, comfortable, temperatures (about 55 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit).

Frequently, questions about watering the African violets are asked. Guidelines would depend on the weather, the size of the plant, the kind of pot, and the soil. Three popular ways to water African violets are top watering, bottom watering and wicking. Whichever you select, make sure the water is at room temperature so it will not shock the plant. Water only when the top of the soil is dry to the touch. If you water from the top, get no water on the leaves or the crown. Never let the plant remain in water after the soil becomes damp. Top watering is periodically necessary to wash away mineral salts that build up. Some African violet lovers use soluble plant food mixed with watering to promote beautiful blooms. This compensates for food deficiencies of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. Phosphorus promotes better blooming.

Since violets have small root systems, they seem to bloom better when a little potbound. If you must repot, use only the next size larger. Sterilized, inexpensive, commercially packaged soils for African violets make potting easy.

A visit to a commercial greenhouse where violets are a specialty would be a good start toward raising beautiful African violets.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.