

African Violets by: Master Gardener Gail Elmore

During hot summers or cold winters, my favorite kind of gardening is indoor gardening, where it's always comfortable. My favorite indoor plants are African violets and their various cousins. They do well in the temperature range we also enjoy, 65 – 75 degrees, and are quite happy on a window sill with bright light, but no direct sunshine. For many years, I had three African violets on my north window sill. They bloomed almost year around: during the hottest part of the summer, when outdoor plants were looking pretty stressed, they bloomed; during the snow and ice of winter, when outdoor plants were dead or dormant, they bloomed. I learned about different kinds of African violets; in addition to the standard types we see in garden shops there are also semi miniature, miniature and trailing varieties! Some even have variegated leaves that are very attractive without any blooms. And there still are some of the original plants from Africa – species plants. All our present day varieties were hybridized from these original plants.

As I learned more, I wanted to try growing different varieties of African violets, but my window sill was maxed out, so I experimented with growing African violets under artificial lighting. Two fluorescent bulbs in a shop light work quite well; standard plants should be about 10-12 inches below the bulbs and semi miniature or miniature plants about 6-8 inches below. They need about 10-12 hours of light a day to bloom.

African violets are shallow rooted and need to be slightly root-bound to bloom. For standards a pot about 1/3 the diameter of the plant should be about right; semi miniature and miniature plants are happy in a 2 ¼ inch diameter pot. If the pot is too large, the plant will grow roots to try and fill the pot instead of producing blooms, and can it cause the plant to stay too wet which may lead to root rot.

This fall, on October 8, our local African violet group, the First African Violet Society of Wichita Falls, will host an African violet workshop and sale at River Bend Nature Center. They will have educational programs on the care of African violets, demonstrate how to repot your African violet and have African violets and their cousins on display. The website for the national group, African Violet Society of America, is www.avsa.org