



Displayed in one of Pat Addison's handmade pots, a trailing African violet—Rob's Boolaroo—shares light from a living room window with an orchid named Burregera Stefan ester.

Growing a Little Green

African violets support gardener's hobby

By JILL SHEPHERD
PHOTOS BY AL GRILLO

Hobbyist Pat Addison, who maintains about 2,000 African violets in her home on Waldron Drive, has figured out how to grow the popular plants without going broke. “You can sell what you grow,” she said. “And they make good



Pat Addison [top] holds a species of African violet *Saintpaulia obicularis* in her left hand and a hybrid chimera, or striped, variety in the other. In the foreground of Addison's growing room are two hybrid African violets: Louisiana Lullaby (pink) and Rodeo Roundup (purple).

gifts, too.”

A member of the Aurora Borealis African Violet Society, Addison figured out how other members could finance their hobby for a year by growing a few extra plants for club sales. Her idea was published in the society's August 2001 newsletter, “Blooms and Buds.”

First, Addison wrote, propagate and grow 24 to 30 plants, then sell them for about \$7 each. After covering the cost of electricity, pots, soil and fertilizer, according to her calculations, you'll have enough money to buy more plants.

Addison is one of millions of African violet growers worldwide. Named for Baron von Saint Paul, who discovered it in 1892 in East Africa, the African violet wasn't introduced commercially to the United States until 1926. Thousands of varieties of *Saintpaulia* now are available, the result of hybridization and mutation.

“I guess I've been growing African violets all of my life,” Addison said. “Dad used to grow them, although he wouldn't admit it. We'd go shopping and find a little plant and he'd say, ‘Let's take this home for your mom,’ but he was the one who actually took care of them.”

Despite their reputation, African violets aren't fussy plants. They are easy to propagate and thrive in the same conditions people are comfortable in—not too hot and not too cold, with 40 to 50 percent humidity. Addison raises several varieties: chimera (striped petals), trailing, miniature and standard. In the proper window light they will bloom from February through November; under artificial light they will give color all year. In Addison's mind, blooms are the most important feature of a house plant.

“Why give up space if it isn't going to give me a flower?” she said. Only two non-flowering plants are allowed in her house—an 8-foot ponytail palm that she started from seed 18 years ago and a small *Dieffenbachia* that belongs to her daughter.

Addison's living room is crowded with orchids but holds few African violets because she keeps most of them in a downstairs plant room. “I only move them upstairs when they look nice,” she said.

Her 10-by-12-foot growing room gives off a blaze of light from two dozen 4-foot fluorescent tubes that illuminate 10 shelves of African violets and their cousin, *Streptocarpus*. The room also holds a potting bench and a work center for stained-glass projects.

The 250 varieties of African violets have catchy names like Buckeye Cranberry Swirl, Curlie Werlie, Deadly Sting and Maverick Faded Jeans. Addison even has a namesake: Sora's Patty Ann, a hybrid developed by her sister Barb Werness in Arizona. When growers name their plants, Addison explained, they usually use the same first word in the name of each variety. In this case, sora is the name of a small bird. Some of her sister's other hybrids in Addison's collection are Sora's Helen Margaret and Sora's School Time.

All of the African violets in Addison's collection are hybrids, with the exception of one species plant that she keeps to remind her of the African violet's roots, so to speak.

"This is how you would find it in Africa," she said, holding a pot of *Saintpaulia obicularis* and pointing out the gangly growth that sets it apart from compact, modern hybrids.

"I like to look at it and see how far they have come through hybridization. I think it is astounding."

Maintaining such a large African violet collection doesn't faze Addison, who finds time to raise two teenagers (a third no longer lives at home), operate a home day-care center, throw pottery, create stained-glass window hangings and spend long weekends on the Kenai Peninsula fishing with her husband and children.

To save time, she uses two techniques that guarantee her plants will never run out of water. First, she lines the trays that hold the pots with pieces cut from absorbent, polyester blankets that she buys for \$5. "I just water the trays, not the individual plants," Addison said. When she is going to be out of town for more than a weekend, she covers the plants with the type of thin plastic obtained from dry cleaners or paint stores.

"I also take off all the flowers," Addison said. The plastic traps the moisture, and dead flowers don't drop onto the leaves and rot. Treated like this, the plants can be left on their own for two or three weeks.

Life with 2,000 African violets, about 125 streptocarpus, hundreds of orchids and a couple of dozen insectivorous plants might get chaotic, but Addison seems exceptionally well organized.

"I know exactly what I have in the plant room at all times," she said, because she has an inventory that lists each variety she grows and indicates how many times she has propagated a variety or sold one. If she sells a plant at a garden show, or grows three new ones from leaf petioles, she notes the transaction on her computerized list.

Addison sells her stained glass and African violets at bazaars and club-sponsored sales. She said she loves to have teenagers exhibit an interest in

African violets.

"I'd like to get the next generation hooked," she said. "If a young person comes by my booth I say, 'Here, come in, I'll set you up.'"

The Aurora Borealis African Violet Society meets the third Tuesday of the month except August and December at the Mary Conrad Center. Call 333-5949 or 562-0547 for information.

JILL SHEPHERD is senior editor of ALASKA MAGAZINE.

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