



The Newsletter of the Delaware African Violet and Gesneriad Society

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October 2013

Secrets from an Award-Winning African Violet Grower

Last month's presentation by Sandy Skalski, winner of numerous awards at the national African Violet Convention in Cherry Hill, revealing her secrets to producing award winning African violets offered great information to both novice and accomplished growers and is worthy of inclusion in this newsletter as a reference for those fortunate enough to attend the program, and to share with members who couldn't join us.

As a consummate grower for show and one who has dealt with the devastation of Impatiens Necrotic Spot Virus (INSV), Skalski is somewhat ruthless in evaluating her plants and roguing plants which do not perform well under her conditions. She also offered a few tips for selecting plants for show. For example, she noted that African violets which have flowers with green edges seem to last longer under her growing conditions, resulting in higher flower count when shown. In addition to selecting plants with long-lasting flowers and high flower count, she also selects those which consistently exhibited nice natural growth habit and which adapt well to her growing conditions.

She visits shows and makes lists of winners as well as making a note of show winners published in *African Violet Magazine*. When reading catalogues from vendors, she looks for phrases like "show quality" in the description of the variety. Skalski noted that the Pat Hancock's Buckeye hybrids are generally excellent and exhibit great symmetry. For more compact varieties she recommended 'Ness' Satin Rose,' 'Ness' Crinkled Blue,' and 'Bumbles Orchard Magnet. She also recommended 'Ma's Debutante,' and many of



Sandy's Saintpaulia 'Cerelda'

Rob's hybrids. One of her outstanding entries in the AVSA Cherry Hill, New Jersey Show a few years ago was 'Cirelda' which she grew in natural light and which took 15 years to attain its enormous proportions.

Skalski noted that she basically had two growing areas. One was on the first floor in natural light while the other was in the basement under T-12 fluorescent lamps. She noted that her basement growing area is out of the way and has fairly consistent temperature and humidity, thus avoiding culture breaks. She also noted that it is isolated from outdoor pests and the problems which can result.

She said that her basement can get occasionally chilly in winter, so she may need to relocate her variegated plants to a higher shelf in her plant stand where the temperature runs a little warmer. Skalski noted that she often transfers plants between shelves to take advantage of the differences in temperatures using the warmer higher shelves to accelerate blossoming and the lower cooler shelves to slow it down.

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Sandy Skalski of the African Violet Club of Burlington County wowed our members at the September meeting with her great presentation.

She emphasized that African Violets need room, and she has different shelves for standards, trailers and miniatures. Miniatures, she added, need higher light intensity than do the standards. She grows her standards 10"-12" below the fluorescent tubes, miniatures 6"-8" below the tubes and the trailers about 10 inches below the tubes. She wick waters her plants and therefore finds a lighter mix amended with perlite works best. She has used both Pro-Mix and Fafard mix with good results. The wick is an acrylic black yarn since it won't rot, and because she can easily detect root mealy bug if it is present. She uses one wick per pot, but two or more on 5 inch and larger pots to assure water and fertilizer is supplied uniformly to the root ball of the plant. She also has used Miracle Gro mix but increases the proportion of perlite to 60% mix and 40% perlite, since Miracle Gro is heavier than the other two mixes she uses.

She transplants her plants into incrementally larger pots starting with small plantlets in 3 ounce solo cups with drainage holes. When the plant's roots begin to fill the cup, the plants is transplanted into a 3 inch pot, then to a 4 inch pot and so on. Small standard violets, like 'The Alps' is finished in a 4 or 4 ½ inch squatty pot. She uses a 5 inch pot for larger standards and 6 inch pots for really large growing standards. She places a ¼ inch-1/2" layer of perlite in the bottom of the pot before inserting the plant into the pot to enhance drainage, noting that in nature, *Saintpaulias* are lithophytic, or that they grow on rocks. She demonstrated how to use a plastic card to keep the potting mix off the leaves when reporting by inserting it carefully under the crown of the plant. She noted that she transplants her miniature African Violets about three times annually and her trailers and standards about twice each year.

Skalski noted that her water tends to be alkaline. She uses both DynaGro 7-9-5 and Algoflash to fertilize her plants. She prefers the concentrated liquid fertilizers to the soluble salt types, noting that liquids do not tend to accumulate as much in the potting medium. She stressed that consistency is paramount to growing a show plant, and therefore she does not foliar feed her plants since it might result in a culture break.

She stated that she uses sticky cards to monitor for pests. She noted that either yellow or blue sticky card will attract ant trap thrips, but she uses the yellow cards. Skalski emphasized that she has zero tolerance for thrips and isolates new plants for six months before they are introduced into her collections. She does not spray the plants when they are first acquired since she wants to determine if they have any infestation. She said her motto is "if in doubt, throw it out!" INSV is

spread only by western flower thrips. She highly recommended that every African Violet Club invest in a INSV kit from Agdia to test plants members suspect could be infected. INSV is a devastating and potentially costly virus

Her trailers grow well on the first floor in natural light benefitting from a corner where there are two windows. She rotates the plants on a regular basis to encourage symmetry.

For her plant stands, she uses two four foot T-12 fluorescent tubes per shelf as previously noted, one cool white and one warm white or Sunlight tube. She changes one tube on each shelf every January, and covers the new bulb with a single sheet of newspaper for 8-10 hours to acclimate the plants and to avoid damage. The lights are illuminated for 12 hours a day, although she increases the duration to 13 ½ hours closer to a show, if necessary to speed up blossoming.

To keep the plants in good shape, she encouraged grooming them early and often, noting that she grooms her trailers at every watering. She uses squares of toilet tissue to evaluate the removal of leaves, by placing the square of tissue strategically to see the eventual effect if they are removed.

Skalski demonstrated how to thin the crown of a trailing African Violet to allow light to reach the interior of the plant to activate latent buds to produce more crowns. She titled her demonstration "Extreme Makeover-African Violet Trailer Edition."

Skalski noted that her grooming kit included a grooming light magnifier a magnifying glass, tweezers, pointed scissors, soft little brushes, little lights and a roll of toilet tissue.

She discussed how to prepare for a show and recommended using a standard schedule like that developed by Pauline Bartholomew, but stressed it is important to tailor it to the plants being grown and the conditions in which they are growing. She suggested selecting the best plants and assume a fifty per cent success rate. Again, she emphasized that consistency in culture is the critical factor in attaining an award winning plant. She also suggested allowing the plants to bloom once to make certain they are consistent with the cultivar, before disbudding.

Skalski noted that a grower can influence blossoming time. If a plant needs to be speeded up, raise the temperature and humidity gradually. To slow it down, move it to a lower shelf or at the end of the shelf where there is lower light intensity and temperature. With the proper manipulation, the plant will be in fullest bloom.

Skalski maintains extensive records on her plants including where it was acquired, a description and how many weeks to achieve full bloom. She also takes copious photographs of the plants. She cautions that one should grow only as many plants that they have time to maintain.

Finally, she discussed transporting show plants to the show. She uses large clear plastic containers with lids not only for transporting the plants, but also for keeping them in isolation following the show. She uses Styrofoam to secure the pots and to leaves leaf rings on the plants to minimize damage.

Skalski's program was both comprehensive and enlightening. The perfect way to begin the Club's 2013-2014 season!

Pinching: What, Where, How, and When to Pinch Your Plants

By: Andrew Norris

Reprinted with permission from the Volume 44 Number 5, May 2013 issue of Petal Tones, the newsletter of the National Capital Chapter of the Gesneriad Society. Andrew will be presenting a program on Episcias this month.

Pinching is a technique that, as the name implies, often involves using the index finger and thumb to remove portions of a plant to encourage the plant grow in a more pleasing manner. A common site of

pinching is the crown or apical bud of a plant. By removing the center of growth, the plant is directed by its own hormones, to put out new, often lateral growth. There are many plants and many ways that apply this technique will help you get show winning plants.



Andrew Norris with *Streptocarpus* 'Iced Pink Flamingo'

A great many gesneriads and probably some in every genus can be pinched in some way. Most common targets are *Sinningias*, *Kohlerias*, *Saintpaulia*, *Episcias*, *Columnnea*, *Nematanthus*, *Alsobia*, and intergenerics. An easy way to know whether a plant will respond well to pinching is to determine if the

plant already has multiple growing points, such as stolons, branching stems, or multiple crowns. Take a look at *Sinningia leucitricha* vs. *Sinningia* 'Prudence Risley'. The former, may have multiple growth points from the tuber, but the growth itself does not branch or for lateral shoots, so no pinching is recommended, while *Sinningia* 'Prudence Risley' readily produces lateral shoots, so removing the tallest growing point will allow the other growth, along the stem to mature, giving you a more compact, full, and floriferous plant. This is the most basic example of pinching.

Another form of pinching does not involve removing the growing point, but simply removing leaves that shade lateral growth. An example of this could be a *Kohleria*, which while generally will respond to the technique mentioned above, may do just as well, if the plant already shows lateral growth, with the removal of a few leaves. By removing the leaves that are shading the lateral shoots, I can keep the central growing point, but also promote a fuller plant, by getting light and energy to those lateral shoots. When the growth is even, the plant can be potted lower, to where the lateral shoots originate from the main stem, thus giving you a compact, floriferous, and stable plant, that isn't too tall, top heavy, or showing bare stems.

With trailing or stoloniferous plants, there are a couple of typed of pinching that work well. With *Alsobia* and *Episcias*, the removal of stolons allows the plant to direct energy into the main crown and that crown will grow larger, fuller, and have more flowers. Once the crown reaches the desired size, a few stolons (2 or 3) can be allowed to grow, be tucked into the same pot, and have the same technique applied, of removing the stolons. With their fast growth, you will achieve a full, evenly sized pot of floriferous crowns. When all the crowns are mature, I usually allow each crown to produce 2 or 3 stolons to trail down and add drama to the presentation. I pinch all additional stolons and maintain the plant this way. By all means, root those pinched stolons to share with your gesneriad friends!

For trailing plants, such as scandent *Columnnea* and *Aeschynanthus*, the removal of growing tips, from the trailing stem, will promote branching and a fuller plant and the removes tips can be used to fill in bare areas in the pot or general propagation. With *Aeschynanthus*, it should be noted that some bloom on older growth and pinching the tips can interrupt and delay flowering.

Upcoming DAVS Meetings...

Tuesday, October 8, 2013 – 7:30 p.m.

Rockland Place, 1519 Rockland Rd, Wilmington, DE 19803

Hosts: Snacks - Carol Moody

Beverages – Linda McGregor

Raffle Prizes – Mary Schaeffer/Libby Behnke

Mini-Workshop – Planting Seed by Mary Schaeffer

Program: “How to Grow Fabulous Episcias in Your Home” Andrew Norris, President of the Baltimore African Violet Society will share his considerable expertise in growing huge episcias that blow the judges away. Stolon rooting project will follow. Show and Tell and Plant/Supply Sale will be held.

Tuesday, November 12, 2013 – 7:30 p.m.

Rockland Place, 1519 Rockland Rd, Wilmington, DE 19803

Program: “DAVS Golden Jubilee Remembering our Roots” Tuesday, November 12, 2013 – 7:30 p.m. Rockland Place, 1519 Rockland Rd, Wilmington, DE 19803

Hosts: Snacks - Diana Metzger

Beverages – Bobbie LaFashia

Raffle Prizes – Linda McGregor/Barb Borleske

Program: “DAVS Golden Jubilee Remembering our Roots” – Our long time members will reminisce about the past 50 years with slides highlighting special events and friends. Following the presentation, pot up plantlets to grow on for our show, including Saintpaulia ‘Double Black Cherry’ a favorite vintage violet introduced in 1962 and featured in our early shows. Little Show and Plant/Supply Sale will be held.

Tuesday, December 10, 2013 – 6:30 p.m.

Note earlier time! Holiday Dinner and Auction

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c/o Quentin Schlieder, Editor

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Upcoming Shows and Sales...

October 12, 2013 Noon – 6 p.m.

The African Violet Society of Philadelphia will present "Once upon a time - Storybook Violets" in Cathedral Hall at Cathedral Village Retirement Community, 600 East Cathedral Road, Philadelphia, PA 19128 (near Andorra Shopping Center). For more information, contact Judith Smith at smithja@mail.med.upenn.edu.

November 6 - 10, 2013

The Mid-Atlantic African Violet Society will hold its 2013 Convention and show at the Double Tree Hotel, 100 Middle Street, New Bern, North Carolina, 28560. This year's theme is "African Violets Bear It All in New Bern." For more information, visit their website at <http://maavs.org/maavs2013>.

Growing Supplies Available

If you need supplies, please let Barb Borleske know what you need. You can contact her by telephone at (302) 691-8487 or by e-mail at bborleske@yahoo.com. The e-mail version included a PDF attachment of the current catalog. A few hard copies will be available at the meeting. Orders could be given to Barb at the October meeting and delivered at the November meeting, or could be picked up at her house. The following items are not available: 3" white tub pots (green is available); Optimara Water Maids and Dandy Pots.

Event Supports Chapter

The Delaware African Violet and Gesneriad Society will be participating in Boscov's "Friends Helping Friends" on Tuesday, October 22, 2013. See Anne Petrucci for tickets for discounted shopping and much more! Support our Society with your purchase! Great for your 2013 holiday shopping.

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