

Rejuvenating Your African Violet

When your violet looks like a palm tree, or has too many leaves there are several steps you can take to bring the plant back into vigorous growth and bloom. If a mature African violet is not repotted regularly (at least yearly) it will begin to show a bare stem above the soil level where the older outer leaves have died in the natural aging process of the plant. The longer the interval of time between repots the longer the stem will grow. It is natural to occasionally have an older outer leaf die off. If you leave on all of the side shoots that may develop on your plant as time passes you will need to divide your violet, too. The extra side rosettes of leaves sap the strength of the plant therefore reducing the amount of bloom.



Many violets that have been in the same pot and soil for years will appear healthy and may be blooming nicely atop the bare "neck". It is only a matter of time, however, before the plant will begin to decline. As the neck becomes longer and longer, the nutrients and water will have a more and more difficult time traveling between the leaves and the roots. Also, as time passes the soil slowly becomes more and more acidic and eventually begins to burn the roots.

To rejuvenate a violet which has developed a long neck start by letting the soil nearly dry out and then un-pot the plant. Notice how long the bare section of stem is. If the bare stem (neck) is only $\frac{1}{4}$ " to $1\frac{1}{2}$ " long, then start by using a paring knife to scrape the stem clean of any debris above the soil line, but below the rosette of leaves. The stem may have the dried stubs of leaves that have died and probably has developed a paper like brown callous-like skin. This scraping is comparable to peeling a carrot. You need to remove just the outer dry layer from the stem.

Starting from the very bottom of the root ball, and working upwards, crumble off an amount of soil comparable to how long the bare neck is. Also, working from the sides of the root ball crumble away the old soil to a depth of $\frac{1}{2}$ " in all the way around. By crumbling off this soil you are making it possible to set the plant down deeper in the pot thus burying the section you scraped, and you are making room to be able to add fresh soil around the root ball. The diameter of the span of the leaves determines the pot size. You want a 3 to 1 ratio: leaf span to pot opening. Put a shallow layer of fresh potting soil in the bottom of the pot and set the plant down into the pot. The potting soil should be moist enough to hold its shape briefly when formed by hand into a snowball. Add fresh soil at the top to cover the section of the trunk that you scraped. This fresh soil will stimulate the formation of roots from the trunk where it was scraped. If after several days you notice the older, outer leaves becoming wilted even though the soil is moist put the repotted plant in a re-closable plastic bag large enough to accommodate the leaves. Grow the plant inside this bag until the leaves firm up. The plant may need to be tented for up to a month. Do not use the wicking method to water the plant while it is tented.



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If the bare stem of your violet is $1\frac{1}{2}$ " long (or longer) it is best to re-root the top part of the plant. Cut the rosette of leaves off 2" down along the bare neck. The rosette of leaves should all stay connected to each other. Since violets rarely re-sprout from the old root system or trunk most growers discard them. Remove any damaged or unhealthy looking older leaves from the rosette making it as symmetrical as possible. Also, remove any open blooms or buds showing color. If the span of the plant exceeds 9" in diameter then break off more leaves until the overall diameter is 9" or less. Be sure you have scraped the stem clean and smooth.



If you plan to later use the wick watering method, then insert the wick up into the empty pot at this point before filling it with soil. Fill an appropriately sized pot nearly full of soil and poke a hole down into the mix to accommodate the stem you scraped clean. You may not have a perfectly straight trunk to bury nor may the trunk be oriented at an "easy-to-bury" angle. Keep the leaf rosette positioned parallel to the soil even if this means the trunk section does not go straight down into the soil mix. Over time where the bare stem contacts the moist soil roots will form and grow out into the soil. The stem should be planted to a depth directly under the lowest most leaf. Take care that the leaf stems are not buried. They can rest on the surface of the soil, but should not be buried, as they may rot off. If the rosette seems too wobbly in the soil stake it with plastic toothpicks or swizzle sticks pushed down between the leaf stems at intervals. You can remove them in a few weeks after the roots have started to grow holding the plant in place.



To prepare the plant for growing its new root system, mist the inside of a re-closable plastic bag lightly with room temperature water to bring up the humidity quickly. Water the soil with only 2 or 3 tablespoons of water to make the soil barely moist to the touch. Next put the plant, pot and all, into the plastic bag. Select a bag that will accommodate the spread of the leaves. Zip the bag tightly closed. Humidity is more important at this point in time than air circulation. You can also use a clear (or translucent) plastic bag such as



is used for fruit or vegetable produce. Slide the bag down over the plant and rubber band it around the pot or put the potted plant into the bag and fasten the open end shut. A re-sealable bag is easier to open and close for weekly moisture checks.

Position the plant in its plastic bag in bright, but indirect daylight (or under grow lights if you have them.) Most crown re-roots (the crown is the top leafy section of a violet) will be rooted within one month. Open the bag weekly and be sure the soil is moist. There should not be any accumulated water in the bottom of the bag. Condensation inside the bag is normal and beneficial. To check whether or not your plant has begun to root wait until at least 3 weeks have passed and then gently tug on the plant. If you feel resistance then you can assume roots have formed. Sometimes you will even see the roots growing along the surface of the soil in the high humidity. When approximately a month has passed and the plant appears rooted open the bag and wait until any condensation has evaporated. This usually takes overnight and gradually acclimates the plant to the drier air outside the bag. As the re-

rooted plant grows larger move it to a larger sized pot as dictated by the span of the leaf system.

The above re-rooting procedure can also be used to save a violet that has been over-watered resulting in root rot and/or crown rot. Cut off all of the roots and any wilted leaves. This will create a short bare stem or neck. Scrape it and cut it back to clean green tissue removing any rotted sections. Be sure that there are no rotted portions on the inner core of the stem section. Proceed as described above to re-root what is left of the crown.

Your violet will grow flatter and more symmetrically if you allow only one rosette of leaves to grow on one root system. Keep all suckers (side shoots) groomed off of your plant unless it is a trailing type violet. A sucker is the beginning of a new plant which forms near the base of the main plant or in the axils, which are the places where the adult leaf stems join the central core of the violet. Remove suckers with a pencil point, a nut pick, the point of a small knife, or with tweezers. If suckers are not removed they will grow larger and larger and you will eventually have a plant with 2 or 3 or more plants all crowded together in one pot.



The root system works to keep all of these plants alive, but doesn't have as much energy to produce abundant bloom. A violet that needs to be divided is simply one that has never had the suckers removed as they have grown. They eventually grow so large that they distort the shape of the original plant and diminish the amount of bloom. If you have a violet with 2 or 3 or more plants in one pot it is best to separate them.



After allowing the soil to dry, slide your crowded calamity out of its pot and gently crumble away the soil. If the plant has been in the same soil long enough to have grown all those suckers, then it is long past due for repotting. Gently untangle the leaves determining which leaves are joined together to create which rosettes. One by one exert a slow downward force on each individual rosette beginning with those attached closest to the soil line. Sometimes the rosettes must be cut apart using a sharp clean knife. Try to keep the roots attached to those rosettes that have roots. Depending upon the



age of the plant not all of the suckers may have roots. If necessary scrape clean the bare neck of each sucker and pot each one in an appropriately sized pot following the 3 to 1 ratio of leaf span to pot opening. Small suckers that have at least 4 nickel sized leaves, but probably no roots, can be rooted using the procedure for crown set up described earlier. There will usually be no bare neck in need of scraping on these small rosettes and you will

definitely have to stake them to hold them in contact with the moist soil until they have rooted. These smallest suckers usually have to be cut away from the original plant. Try using the smallest knife you have for this chore. The goal is to cut out the sucker keeping it unbroken without inadvertently cutting off the surrounding adult leaves. Sometimes it is simply easier to sacrifice these smallest suckers by removing them one leaf at a time.



You may find it necessary to tent some of the suckers under plastic whether they are large or small, or have roots or not, so watch them for signs of wilting after you pot them up. As the plants grow check for suckers periodically and remove them as soon as you notice them. This will save you lots of work over time.