

## **Best of Show: The Ultimate Experience**

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African violets and I go back a long time – 21 years to be exact. I began my long love affair with African violets when I was nine years old, at which time I knew of only three types: purple, pink and white. I remember “fertilizing” one poor African violet with milk in hopes that it would perk up and bloom. That violet bit the dust a long time ago.

It wasn't until 1979, during undergraduate studies at Texas A&M University, that my interest in African violets really skyrocketed. In the spring of 1980, I joined the Brazos Valley African Violet Club and since their annual show had already come and gone that year, it wasn't until the spring of 1981 that I entered my first African violet show with one plant – Optimara Kentucky – which was awarded a blue ribbon and won best in class. I was in hog heaven and was thrilled to have won a ribbon of any color. I entered again the following year and won five blue ribbons.

By this time, I had been diagnosed (by fellow undergraduate friends majoring in psychology) as having “acute obsessive/compulsive saintpauliachondria”.

Finally, in 1983, I was awarded a rosette which was inscribed the three most important words in an African violet grower's vocabulary: BEST OF SHOW. I also won my first gold rosette for best AVSA collection that year.

Since then, a lot of things have happened and to make a long story shorter, I have subsequently amassed over 200 awards including the top three awards in any African violet show – Best of Show, 2<sup>nd</sup> Best of Show and Best AVSA Collection.

I have entered a total of 14 competitive African violet shows – at the local, state and national levels – at which 17 of my entries have been considered for Best of Show honors.

Upon conclusion of my 1988 “showing season”, just after competing at the “nationals” in Dallas, I decided to take a temporary leave of absence from showing due to severe burnout. However, I'm starting to get the itch again and may return to the show circle either this fall or next spring.

Since 1987, two of my show plants have garnered full color pages in the African Violet Magazine.

One reason why we all read the AVM, in addition to looking at the beautiful pictures and finding out what's winning around the country and what we can't possibly live without, is to obtain sound, reliable, “juicy” growing tips from other expert growers from around the country in hopes that doing so may result in the ultimate experience: BEST OF SHOW.

**WATER:** I use only natural spring water (bottled) to water my violets (utilizing the wick and reservoir method). I bathe each of my show plants with distilled water on a quarterly basis.

**LIGHTS:** I use two 40-watt GTE Sylvania Gro-Lux bulbs, one wide spectrum and one regular, per shelf. I recommend a distance of about 8-10 inches from the lights; that's the distance from the foliage, not from the top of the pot.

The lights are kept in operation 10 hours per day except at show time, in which case I may sometimes gradually increase the lights to a maximum of 12 hours per day when show plants are not coming into bloom soon enough. The bulbs are replaced once a year but on an alternating schedule so that only one bulb is replaced every six months (thus, one bulb is always less than six months old).

**FERTILIZER:** I alternate year-round between several excellent balanced fertilizers including Rapid Gro and Peters 20-20-20. Approximately 10-12 weeks prior to a show, I switch from any one of several balanced fertilizers to either Peters 12-36-14 or Peters 5-50-17, both of which are used as “bloom boosters” to encourage maximum setting of buds. The latter is used for only 3 weeks, commencing at 10 weeks prior to show. Although several top growers highly recommend foliar feeding.

I personally have not had good results with foliar feeding, and, as a result, do not feel comfortable making a recommendation as to its use.

**SOIL & REPOTTING:** As a general rule, I repot each plant in my collection every 2-3 months, gradually moving plants from one pot size to the next as follows: 2 ¼", 3", 3 ½", 4", 5" (azalea), 6" bulb (pan) pots. I use two different potting mixes: Dottie Wilson's Show Plant Soil and a 1-1-1 mix (equal parts of peat, vermiculite and perlite) developed by J. C. and Lenora Munk of Houston.

**BLOSSOMS:** More than 50% of an African violet's score when point scored (use "Handbook for African Violet Growers, Exhibitors, and Judges" for a complete breakdown of the standard scale of points) is derived from its blossoms (25 points for floriferousness according to variety, plus 15 points for type and size of blossom, plus 10 points for color of blossom equals 50 points out of a total of 100 points). Up to another 5-10% (or more) of a show plant's point score total can be in the form of deductions (generally ½ point each) for spent blossoms. Therefore, a show plant's blossoms should be a major point of consideration and one should take note of the following: 1) never leave a spent blossom on a show plant; 2) if a bloom appears that it may be spent, IT IS; 3) if a blossom has an "eensy, teensy, little brown dot" on it, remove the blossom; 4) do not leave on any show plant a "denuded" bloom stem (as defined by Pauline Bartholomew in her wonderful book, "Growing to Show") (e.g., the kind with three tiny blooms dangling at the end of a huge, barren bloom stalk); 5) take full advantage of the stake placed in the pot to identify the variety, by propping up one or more bloom stems for a fuller and more even distribution of the blossoms; 6) position the plant so that the "front side" of the plant is the side which gives the plant the appearance of having the most blossoms; and 7) gently move bloom stalks into position to form an even distribution of blossoms around the crown of the plant (either in a "nosegay" fashion or a "halo" fashion). I have on a few occasions, "rearranged" the blossoms on a fellow competitor's plants (with their permission, of course) almost to the point where the grower didn't recognize his or her own plant.

**DISBUDDING:** I recommend partial disbudding of show plants year-round (I never allow more than three bloom stems to mature) and complete disbudding of young plants under 12 months of age (to allow for maximum growth of foliage). A starter plant is allowed to bloom once to assure that it is blooming "true" per its color classification. I practice partial disbudding of show plants for the sole reason that I can enjoy my violets and have a little color in the house and at the same time, I can grow all of my plants for show without them suffering a culture break (caused by heavy blooming) which often results in stunted and/or deformed leaves in the center of the plant. At show time, I recommend complete disbudding (as opposed to clipping stalks, leaving ¼" or 1/8" stubs) at about 7 ½ to 8 weeks for most semi-doubles and doubles and five to six weeks for singles. One exception is "Something Special" which I disbud for the final time at 10 weeks. Keep in mind, however, that varying cultural conditions and/or the weather may necessitate making adjustments to your disbudding schedule. In my experience, I have not noticed doubling of the number of blossoms put up by a plant, as professed by most advocates of the "clipping method". However, I have noticed at least one direct result of the "clipping method"; show plants are often left with unsightly scar tissue when the stubs are removed. Also, removing the stubs can sometimes require the skills of a trained surgeon and more often than not, at least in my case, results in a few broken leaves, heightened blood pressure and some foul-tasting words, I have produced show plants with over 200 blossoms at show time without utilizing the clipping method.

**SHOW VARIETIES:** There are thousands of African violets on the market from which to choose. A few varieties which have consistently performed for me as proven show plants year after year and are as follows: Something Special (Nadeau), Wrangler's Dixie Celebration (Winston Smith), Pink Energy (Nadeau) and Boca Grande (Sandra Williams). Some more current varieties which I feel show great potential for future Best of Show honors are: Harbor Blue (Weber), Picasso (Tremblay), Kathe Denise (Nadeau/Goins), Pink Rosette (Lenora Munk), Texas Lullaby 9Bryant and Apache Jewel (J. C. Munk). These 10 varieties are all spectacular show varieties.

**AVSA COLLECTION:** Rule Number One: *always* enter an AVSA collection. Rule Number Two: use a *planned strategy* in selection, entering and placement of your collection plants. A strategy that I use which has proved very reliable and resulted in one gold rosette after another is as follows: a) *point score* each potential collection plant from those registered plants which you plant to show; and b) scout your competition when you arrive at the show site and i) if your competitors' AVSA collections are not all that strong (e.g., average less than 95 points per plant), select the plants with the highest, third highest, and fourth highest point scores for your AVSA collection and place the plant with the second highest point score in the regular class according to foliage, bloom type and/or bloom color, as applicable, or ii) if, on the other hand, your competitors' AVSA collections are extremely competitive, select the plants with the three highest point scores for your AVSA collection, a common practice of most growers who enter the AVSA collection class. Regarding placement of your AVSA collection entries, I have had the best results

by placing my best plant (i.e., the plant with the highest point score) right up front in the very middle so that its superior qualities will be first thing the judges notice— not the flaws on the other two entries.

**FINAL GROOMING:** Over the years, I have seen and/or judged many African violets which if only the grower had taken a little more time to properly groom would have easily won Best of Show. One such plant in recent memory was the most beautiful specimen of “Wonderland” I have ever seen. It had gorgeous, perfectly symmetrical foliage and over 100 blossoms, yet unfortunately the grower was inexperienced in showing and did not know to remove the small pedicel stubs when removing spent blossoms. This small error on an otherwise spectacular show plant cost the grower Best of Show in a show with 286 entries.

The most important aspect of competitive showing of African violets is grooming. It is something the grower can do to definitely increase the chance of a plant winning a special award, whether it is best in class or Best in Show. I’ve seen absolutely magnificent show plants in pots two or three sizes too small. I’ve seen beautiful show plants which would have been Best of Show material if 5 to 10 spent blossoms had been removed. A grower’s grooming skills are acquired through practice and experience.

Here are a few grooming tips: 1) strive for *immaculately* clean foliage, free from any debris whatsoever (two ways of accomplishing this feat are “bathing” your violets on a regular basis and regularly “dusting” your plants with a soft camel’s-hair brush); 2) remove leaves which are yellowed, “haloed” (have slightly yellowed leaf edges), marred or torn unless doing so will spoil the plant’s symmetry; 3) as a general rule, never leave a *badly* torn leaf on a show plant (even if the plant hypothetically could score 99 points in an AVSA collection, it probably would not be selected for Best of Show, just as a plant with a burned crown, in practice, is usually never selected as “Best of Show, although either might be “considered”); 4) if powdery mildew is present at show time on the foliage, bloom stalks or blossoms, paint the affected foliage, bloom stalks and/or backside of the blossoms with Funginex (1/4 teaspoon per gallon of water) using a soft camel’s hair brush – works every time; 5) always remove pedicel and peduncle stubs completely, using sharp dental scissors – not your fingers or a huge pair of shears; 6) make sure each plant is centered in the pot and is potted in a pot of the correct size (report into the proper size, if necessary, the day of entries) – a plant which is in a pot of the wrong size may lose up to three points and/or Best of Show; 7) check for and remove suckers, if any (be sure to check down under the petioles for “soil suckers” – and a sucker’s a sucker no matter where it comes from!); 8) plan to spend at least one hour per plant to take care of final grooming for each of your top four plants entered in any given show – the idea here is to spend the majority of your time on the plants which have the greatest possibility of winning Best of Show; and 9) if you have the privilege of being allowed in the show room for an hour or so the morning of the show (usually 7:00 – 9:00 a.m. in the case of a local show), utilize every bit of this time for any final grooming; remove spent blossoms as well as “questionable” blossoms (if in question, remove), make sure that each leaf is positioned correctly so that it falls directly between the two leaves in the next outer row, and remove with a soft camel’s hair brush and any visible specks of dust or debris which may have settled on the plant overnight.

**RECYCLING SHOW PLANTS :** All of my entries in any given show are “recycled” approximately 2 -3 weeks following the show. (In-depth discussions on recycling show plants, although an important topic is beyond the scope of this article; however, an excellent source of information on this topic is Pauline Bartholomew’s book, “Growing to Show”). My basic premise is, “If you have a plant that consistently wins awards, why get rid of it?” In addition, I am a firm believer that there are superior strains of almost all varieties, so if you happen upon one, your best option is to hold onto it. How many times have you shown a spectacular show plant of a particular variety, subsequently sold or gotten rid of it following a show, and then couldn’t ever grow another specimen of the same variety with the same results? Recycling show plants has really paid off for me. For example, my oldest “Something Special” (recently turned seven years old) has won one award after another. Its list of accomplishments include: a point score of 99 points in an AVSA collection two years in a row; a 2<sup>nd</sup> Best of Show win one year, winner of six AVSA gold rosettes in six tries, and a Best of Show finalist five times in three growing seasons! The point I would like to make is as follows: If you have a superior plant, hold onto it!

I hope some or all of the foregoing tips will be useful to you in your growing methods, and I wish you the best of luck with your show plants. Please keep in mind, however, that there are about as many ways to grow beautiful, prize winning African violets as there are growers of African violets. It is important to keep an open mind toward new and different methods of growing and always give ample consideration to the ideas and advice of top growers, especially those who are perennial Best of Show winners. Sometimes all it takes is one simple tip from another grower which ultimately results in your winning Best of Show.

Regardless of your particular growing method, one of the most important factors, if not the most important factor, to growing superior show plants which consistently win top awards is **CONSISTENCY**. If you've never won the tricolor award for Best of Show, and you would really like to, start planning a strategy right now to make whatever changes are necessary to your current "game plan" to achieve this honor. The experience of winning Best of Show is truly incredible and is, without a doubt, **THE ULTIMATE EXPERIENCE – GO FOR IT!!!**

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