

## **No one wants ... a scrawny neck!!**

Virginia W. Gasper, Cincinnati Ohio  
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Are you wondering what a "neck" is, in African violet jargon?

A "neck" is the tree trunk that gradually forms between the soil and the leaves of your older plants, as the largest most mature leaves yellow and are removed. To begin with, do keep removing these lower leaves regularly to encourage new leaves to form in the center. Old leaves have lost their usefulness and are sapping the strength of the plant.

Blossoms form only from the center three rows or rosettes of leaves.

Carefully examine one of your plants and try to learn to count these symmetrical rows of leaves as they radiate from the tiny center leaves. The fourth or fifth rows of largest leaves are really only providing background. Most serious growers keep their plants small by breaking off the oldest leaves as a new row forms in the center. But this creates a "neck" which lifts your plant away from the pot and its soil. It looks like a plucked chicken's neck – hence the name.

Periodically your prize plant will have to be repotted deeper into a new pot. Here is the usual (and almost painless) method:

1. Select a clean pot of the same size if you wish to maintain your plant small. A next larger size is fine if you like larger plants, but no more than one inch larger.
2. Put fresh soil in the bottom of this pot. A paper towel piece will hold the soil to if the pot's holes are large, and by the time the paper composts, the soil will be set.
3. With your fingernail or knife, carefully scrape the neck to remove hardened "bark" and expose fresh green tissue on the stem. New roots will grow out from this area.
4. Use a pencil through the bottom hole to push the violet out of the pot with the earth ball intact.
5. With a clean, very sharp knife, cut the bottom layer of soil off the earth ball, roots and all. Remove a little more from the bottom than one length of the neck, plus the fresh soil you put in the pot. If you put in half an inch of soil, and your neck is half an inch long, remove an inch of the earth ball.

6. This is a chilling process at first, but like a surgeon, you get used to it once you see a few patients live. Carefully work off any loose soil clinging to the remaining roots.
7. Now press your violet gently but firmly down into the new pot until the remaining roots make good contact with the fresh soil. This contact is important for growth and watering, so don't be too timid – just gentle.
8. The leaves should now be at the rim of the pot. Put new soil in to cover the neck and almost reach the leaves. Water thoroughly from the bottom and return it to its usual spot. New roots will quickly develop along the old stem and your violet should never know it had an operation!! African violets can live for many, many years...

Please discard the old soil and wash the old pot in one part household bleach to 10 parts of water. It is far easier to prevent pests in your plants than it is to eliminate them.

**AVSA**

2375 North Street  
Beaumont TX 77702

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<http://www.avsa.org>

Tel: 409-839-4725

Email: [avsa@earthlink.net](mailto:avsa@earthlink.net)