

On a recent visit to the Gesneriad Society Booth at a home and garden show I discovered the joys of raising these versatile, easy to grow, colorful family of plants. They're perfect houseplants to locate, purchase and enjoy while waiting for the outside weather to heat up a bit more.

These mostly tropical plants, commonly include African Violets (Saintpaulia hybrids), Gloxinia (Sinningia speciosa hybrids), Lipstick Plant (various species of Aeschynanthus) and Goldfish Plants (Nematanthus species and hybrids).

Many of the plants are extremely easy to grow and are easily cultivated and shared with friends. Plants become festooned with colorful flowers several times a year. You'll propagate and share the plants by divisions and cuttings.

I've always had great luck with African Violets. They are quite forgiving plants. Their main requirements are plenty of bright, indirect light and regular watering, preferably from the bottom. Satisfy this requirement by placing the plant, in its pot, in a saucer large enough to hold about one-half inch of water for several minutes when watering. Use tepid or slightly warm water and fertilize once a month with a liquid fertilizer (10-15-10). (It's a good idea to not fertilize during the three winter months so the plant can take a rest.)

My African Violets sit on a raised hearth in a room with a wall of East-facing windows. Serious growers use fluorescent lights six to eight inches above the plants and lit for fourteen hours a day. In all honesty my African Violets are thriving on neglect. They bask in regular daylight while I'm at work all day. My plants flower about four to six times a year at least and range from shades of pink to deep dark blue. One plant has ruffled cream flowers fringed with pale blue edgings. Another has striped leaves in shades of chartreuse and Kelly green.

The base stem of African Violets continue to lengthen with leaves growing around the stem in ever-expanding rosettes of single furry stems with single leaves. Sometimes the base stem grows so long that the plant looks quite unsightly and/or the stem breaks.

The Gesneriad Society member said trim off some of the leaves exposing more of the stem and to plant it again in moist potting soil (carefully monitoring the plant and peeking now and then to see if new roots are growing). Another method is to suspend the stem in a container of water making sure that the leaves aren't sitting in the water. Keep the water level full and watch the stem for emerging roots. After the roots sprout and grow, put the plant in a pot with soil. The roots will be covered up and the rosettes of leaves will again fill up the pot.

I also have a wonderful Lipstick Plant (Aeschynanthus) that grew all over the mantle (above the unused fireplace). It blooms about once a year with deep black-crimson blossoms opening to expose tube-shaped petals mimicking fire-engine red lipstick. This plant came from cuttings and I'll be taking cuttings soon to share with all my friends. Its tendrils were twining their way up our wall in an attempt to cover up a nearby framed print. I've gathered up the plant and all its wandering branchlets and taken it to work to festoon a long filing cabinet.

Maybe you'd like to expand your horizons even more and add a cape primrose (streptocarpus) to your houseplant collection. Streptocarpus come in many colors and sizes and are forgiving of a bit of neglect. Some varieties bear the name Delta Blue, Concord and Royal Mixed (blends of velvety purple, deep pink and red). You'll also find plants with blooms of white and pink.