

If you're reading this column this morning January 19, take two hours today from 1:00-3:00 p.m. to attend an awesome talk by Master Gardener M. J. Tyler on Gesneriads. The talk is at the Events Center on Fairgrounds Road (old Eagle's Nest). This talk is free – bring all your friends.

Years ago on a visit to the Gesneriad Society Booth at a home and garden show I discovered the joys of raising these versatile, easy to grow, colorful plants. They're perfect houseplants to locate, purchase and enjoy while waiting for the outside weather to heat up a bit more. I hope one or two of these intriguing and varied houseplants will catch your fancy too.

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.

Gardeners usually have great luck with African Violets, 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 own cluster of African violets in individual pots resides on an unused fireplace hearth fourteen feet away from a wall of west-facing windows. Many books say place them facing east. Serious growers use fluorescent lights six to eight inches above the plants and lit for fourteen hours a day. In all honesty my own 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.

When this stem break-off occurs try this tip from a Gesneriad Society member. She 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've tried both these methods and failed sadly, but others have good success.

I also have a wonderful Lipstick plant (Aeschynanthus) that grew all over the mantle (above the unused fireplace). It blooms several times a year with deep black-crimson blossoms opening to expose tube-shaped petals mimicking fire engine red lipstick. This plant came from cuttings and its tendrils were twining their way up our wall in an attempt to cover up a nearby framed print. I gathered up the plant and all its wandering branchlets and it's living atop a filing cabinet in my new office. M.J. is going to help me take lots of cuttings which we'll pot up and sell at the Kitsap County Master Gardener Foundation Plant Sale the weekend of Friday and Saturday May 6 and 7 at the Fairgrounds.

Maybe you'd like to expand your horizons even more and add a cape primrose (Streptocarpus) to your houseplant collection. Streptocarpus grow 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.

Visit www.aggs.org the American Gloxinia and Gesneriad Society Home Page or www.avsc.ca/gesneriads.htm the African Violet Society of Canada for abundant information and photos of these appealing plants.

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