

STREPTOCARPUS

By Betty Tapping

THE GENUS *STREPTOCARPUS* contains some fascinating plants. Many species have been grown as house plants since they were first sent from Africa to Kew over 150 years ago. In Britain they are known as Cape Primrose, probably for their homeland. Their culture is similar to that of *Saintpaulia* (African violet). Propagation and culture are as easy as for African violets, plus you will find them more tolerant of cool temperatures or the occasional drying out. There are plants of differing growth habits in the family – the rosette type, the bushy plant usually known as *Streptocarpella*, as well as unifoliate species.

VARIETIES: We have seen considerable improvement in the streptocarpus hybrids being offered for sale - hybridizers have been very successful in producing large flowering types as well as superb compact hybrids. Some of them are also remarkably beautiful. Because of space limitations in apartment growing I personally prefer small plants. *S. johannis* and *S. rimicola* are two of my favourites. *S. rimicola* is monocarpic (which means that it flowers, sets seed and then dies). Usually there are only one or two blooming stalks, with up to twenty tiny blooms per stalk. The hybrid *S. 'Mighty Mouse'* (*S. cyanadrus* x *S. johannis*) is a small Kartuz hybrid worth growing. It seems more tolerant of summer heat here in Toronto than most. Other reasonably sized hybrids, *S. 'Snow Drop'* and *S. 'Joker'* are presently in my collection - a small collection, granted, but one I thoroughly enjoy. At present I do not own a stemmed variety, but have had success in the past with *S. 'Good Hope'*, and *'Concord Blue'*. (I can't tell one from t'other, they are so much alike).

BASIC CULTURE OF STREPS:

PROPAGATION: *Streptocarpus* is propagated by division, leaf cuttings or by seed.

Division: This is the simplest method. Let the soil dry out just a little so the roots will come apart easily. Take the plant out of the pot and gently pull the root apart, forming small clumps of the original plant. If you have to cut the crown to separate them be sure and let them dry out slightly. Plant the sections individually in pots and keep them, just moist - do not overwater for they will tend to rot. Divisions without roots can be started in vermiculite until they form roots and then they may be potted up.

Leaf Cuttings: When you wish to start new plants from leaves of the rosette type, water the plant thoroughly two or three hours before you take cuttings so the leaves are fresh and turgid. Choose those that are mature and well formed. Cut into 4 inch cuttings to root as you would a violet leaf - or to get more plantlets - cut the main vein from the center of the leaf and plant the cut edge one half inch deep in a mixture of equal parts of perlite and vermiculite, or in your regular potting mix. Cover initially with a plastic baggy to retain humidity. Be sure to place a name tag in the pot (or label the pot) with the name of the variety. Keep the growing medium moist and apply a solution of Superthrive (1 drop to a gallon) to help speed up the rooting process. Plantlets should appear in three or four weeks. When the plantlets are one to two inches high, simply separate them and plant them in individual pots.

Stem Cuttings: *Streptocarpus* like *S.holstii*, *S saxorum*, and *S. kirkii* are grown as trailing plants with succulent stems. To propagate this type, take a number of cuttings (two to three inches of stem); remove the lower one inch of leaves, making a clean cut beneath a node. Plant the cuttings in the same type of growing medium as above. If kept moist and grown in a well lighted area, they should root in three weeks or so. Pot them up and pinch out the tips to make them branch and become bushy. The bushier they are – the more attractive the resulting plant will be, so be quite ruthless in pinching.

Seed: Growing from seed is an easy way to get plants at minimal cost. Seed may be obtained from the AGGS Seed Fund. Growers who face the problem of extreme summer heat often sow seeds in the early fall to get spring blooming plants.

LIGHT: Give *Streptocarpus* indirect or filtered light. They require more light than the African violet to bloom, and may be grown in full sun from October to March and with slight shade during the brighter months. They bloom year round under two tubes of fluorescent light kept on for fourteen hours daily.

WATER: Plants should be grown on the dry side. They will recover from a drought but seldom from a drowning. Never allow them to stand in water. Use lukewarm water as cold water will mark the leaves during high light periods.

GROWING MEDIUM: The growing mix must drain well to avoid crown rot. Any African violet soil or a mix suitable for other fibrous-rooted gesneriads will be fine for *streptocarpus*. Plants may be successfully grown in soilless mixes such as a pro-mix, straight sphagnum moss, etc. I still prefer to use a medium containing soil.

FERTILIZING: *Streptocarpus* are light feeders. A dilute (1 ml to 4 litres water or 1/4 teaspoon to a gallon) mixture of a water soluble fertilizer such as Peters 20-20-20 or Peters Peatlite 15-16-17 is sufficient. Too much fertilizer will cause salts to creep up leaf stems and the plant will rot off at soil level.

TEMPERATURE: Plants are best grown at 16°-21° C (60°-70° F). Daytime temperature must be held under 29° C (85° F). When too hot, the plants will wilt and flowers will collapse, but fortunately, they perk up when they get cooler evening temperatures.

PESTS: *Streptocarpus* do not seem to attract whitefly - but aphids, scale and mealy bugs will feed on them, and soil mealy bugs absolutely love the roots. They may also be attacked by cyclamen mite or blossom thrips.

CARE TIPS: To keep plants blooming, remove seed pods as they appear. Remove old outside leaves as they become pale or discoloured. Regular repotting and grooming are a must for these vigorous growers, as they deteriorate rapidly if rootbound.

HAPPY GROWING!

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