

# GROCERY STORE VIOLETS

By Bobbi Johannsen

So you gave in and bought it.....that violet at the grocery store or big box store. IF the plant looked happy and healthy, you are starting at a good point, but it can veer off badly from here. Maybe it was on sale (a rescue and half dead), then you need to do a LOT of praying!

NOW what do you do?

One thing that should be made clear, the violets from these kinds of stores are NOT to be looked down upon. Hybridizers that sell to mass market outlets have spent years and countless thousands of dollars to come up with strains that are not only beautiful, but hardy and resilient enough to withstand the trials of getting them to market AND being sold on a shelf next to the freezer! These violets are quite often from Optimara (one of the best-known brands around) and would be a great plant for anyone. I urge you to go to their website: [optimara.com](http://optimara.com). They have much information there, from culture and care, pest and diseases... to how to find the name of their African violet that you just bought.

Another very important thing is, in these stores, the African violets are often in with the landscape plants (and everything else that grows and feeds on them). That means they need to be isolated when you bring them home. You do NOT want to infect your existing plants. The main things to look for are thrips, mealy bugs and mites. Thrips are tiny (1/10 – 1/16 inch), tan, torpedo shaped bugs crawling mainly in the bloom. Mites are not visible to the naked eye (1/100 inch), but symptoms are gnarled, gray, hairy, stunted and/or tight centers, among other things. Mealy bugs are small (1/16 inch), white, oval shaped bugs. They can be on the foliage (especially in the axil, where the branches meet the stems) or in the soil (so you really have to look for them). You may see their nest first. These are white cottony masses, harboring their eggs. If you see these on ANY plants, do not buy! You will have an uphill battle trying to get rid of them.

The biggest thing you can do to keep that plant living is to NOT overwater it. Greenhouses use the cheapest soil; they are trying to make money, after all. Their soil is good enough to grow the plant to market, but it can dry out very quickly and become like a brick, almost as bad as the dry cracked soil you see in the desert (not good for delicate roots). On the other side of the coin, it is easy for this soil to soak up too much water and become like a bog. With most people's schedules these days, chances are it will go back and forth...bog to desert...and the plant will suffer and die. Is it any wonder? If you intend to keep the violet in this soil, you need to water when the soil is barely dry. (Stick a wooden pencil in the soil; does some soil cling to the bare wood when you pull it out? If it does, the soil is damp enough. Do not add more.) However, if you want to take it to the next level...here are a few suggestions that I know will help:

- 1) Repot into better soil. How to mix a good soil for African Violets is a seminar in itself. The easiest way is to find a good quality soil for houseplants (we recommend *Foxfarm Ocean Blend*) and mix with up to half perlite. You can find perlite at most big box stores or Ace Hardware. It provides more air pockets in the soil making it harder to overwater. Try to get as much of that old soil off as you can, as gently as you can, without totally destroying EVERY root on the plant. You just want to "tickle" off the excess soil. It is easiest to repot when the soil is slightly damp.
- 2) While you are repotting, look into an automatic watering system called wick watering. This utilizes capillary action to pull water up from a reservoir into the pot with acrylic yarn. The lightened soil mentioned above is **crucial** to this method's success. This may seem like a lot of trouble, but, like many other automatic things, very much worth it! The plant will thank you for giving it such steady watering.
- 3) After repotting, the plant will be really confused and missing much of its previous root system. The violet cannot grow (or bloom) until the roots start growing again! To help this, try increasing humidity around the violet. The best way is to put a clear shower cap over it, or a piece of clear dry-cleaning bag. This will act as a makeshift greenhouse. After giving it a good, gentle watering (and draining), the violet will not

need much more water until the roots start to grow. This can take a couple of weeks. The shower cap can come off slowly after the roots start to grow.

- 4) If you chose to put a wick into your violet, you will need to find a reservoir to put under it. The object is to let the water climb up the wick into the pot without the water touching the pot directly. The reservoir can be as simple as an old butter tub with holes cut into the lid, or as beautiful as a vase that is just the right size to support the pot. In either case, it must hold the pot up high enough to allow air between the water and the pot. But don't put that newly potted violet onto the reservoir yet! Not until the roots start to grow. Without a way for the violet to drink the water, it just isn't needed yet! When it is ready to go onto the reservoir, you may have to re-wet everything, wick and pot, to get the capillary action started again. 10 minutes in a saucer of plain, lukewarm water should do it.
- 5) You do not need to fertilize for another month or so; just having the fresh soil will re-energize the violet. When it is time to start, try to use a fertilizer that is a good overall formula. Fertilizers have 3 numbers, each indicating the percentage of Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Potassium. It is best to get one that is very close in all 3 numbers, thereby giving nutrients to ALL areas of violet development. Bloom formulas sound good but rob the other parts of the plants development if given all of the time. This is **not** good... Also, it is easy to over fertilize, especially if wick watering. Less is better, so start off with only half of the strength that the fertilizer container recommends.
- 6) If you did not put in a wick, you need to stay on top of your violet's water situation. When soil is no longer moist, place violet in a saucer of lukewarm water. After the violet has soaked up all it wants (15 minutes or so), PLEASE take it out of the water. Any more water will only get you into trouble and rot your roots! The amount of water needed will change. At first, the violet will not need a lot of water, because there are not many roots soaking it up. But as they grow (and congratulations as they do grow!), the violet will drink more water. So, what was once a good amount after first repotting will not be enough in a few months. By that time, you may be able to tell if the violet is dry by its weight or you can do the pencil test as described above. Fertilizer will not be needed for the first month after repotting.
- 7) Lighting is the next thing to mention, as it is very important to the well-being of any violet. Finding the right window can be difficult; they like bright, indirect light, such as from the East or Northeast. Good natural light is hard to find, and it changes though the seasons. Artificial lighting is worth investigation. It can make the difference between your violet just growing or thriving and blooming. If you find the window sill is not bright enough, please look into supplemental light.

Although these things can really help your violets, they can be very hard to visualize, let alone accomplish on your own. Wouldn't it be great to see a demonstration of the things I have mentioned?? I know just the place! The **Heart of Jacksonville African Violet Society** meets every month, September thru May. Every meeting has a seminar on something related to African Violets and their many cousins.

Come visit us sometime!

You can also visit us online at: [jacksonvilleviolets.org](http://jacksonvilleviolets.org)

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