Houseplants: African Violets Have Lots of Relatives

by Jeanne Rose, Master Gardener

Most of us are familiar with African violets, but did you know that some of their cousins have also emigrated here from other parts of the world? Maybe you’ve heard of gloxinia? There’s also Cape primrose, False African violet, Magic flowers, and Flame violet to name a few. Let me introduce you to some family members that thrive under the same conditions as African violets.

Gloxinias (*Sinningia*) are native to Brazil and remind you of big African violets. They bloom in summer with gorgeous velvety, ruffled bell-shaped blooms sometimes 4 inches wide. The color range includes white, red, pink, blue and multiple shades of purple. Some flowers have dark dots or blotches, others contrasting bands at edges.

They need constant warmth over 60°F and are mostly grown in greenhouses or as houseplants. Grow them in moist, peaty soil or potting mix (such as commercial African violet potting mix). Their tubers are usually available in winter and spring; for each tuber choose a container large enough to have 2 inches between the tuber and the container on all sides.

Set pots in locations with bright but not direct sun; provide humidity (set pot on gravel in a water-filled tray); and water weekly with one-quarter strength solution of African violet fertilizer. Never allow water to get on the leaves or the crown of the plant (this applies to any of the hairy-leaved plants).

After bloom is finished and the tops have dried back, move pots to a dark place and water only to keep tubers from drying out. When new growth appears, repot into a slightly larger pot with fresh mix for a successful second season. Repeat each year.

Cape primrose (*Streptocarpus*) is a cousin from the wooded mountains of South Africa. It bears beautiful, 1½-2 inch trumpet-shaped flowers sporadically throughout the year. Blossoms are white, blue, pink, rose, red, and purple, often with blotches of a contrasting color. The long, narrow, attractive leaves on these houseplants have wavy edges.
False African violet (*Streptocarpella*) is from East Africa. This plant forms a shrubby, spreading mound to six inches high and two feet wide and performs well in a hanging basket. The fuzzy, fleshy green leaves are 1½ inches long. Blossoms come in waves during much of the year. The 1½-inch wide flowers are pale blue and white and are carried on long, slender stems.

*Achimines* is a perennial with many common names - Cupid’s bow, Hot water plant, Kimono plant, Magic flowers, Monkey-faced pansies, Mother’s tears, Nut orchids, Orchid pansy, and Widow’s tears. This species originated in Central America and the Caribbean. It reaches 1-2 feet high; the slender stems may be upright, spreading, or trailing. The crisp, hairy leaves are bright to dark green. Throughout the summer and early fall, a great display of five-lobed, flat-faced trumpet-shaped flowers 1-3 inches wide appears in purple, orchid, lavender, blue, white, pink, red, or orange. This container plant must be protected from the sun and wind. *Achimines* can be grown six to twelve plants in six-seven-inch pots or hanging baskets.

Finally there is the Flame violet (*Episcia*), which is a low-growing tropical American native that also makes an excellent display in hanging pots. Leaves are 2-5 inches long, 1-3 inches wide and are typically oval, velvety and beautifully colored. The flowers look something like African violet blooms, and come in red, pink, orange, yellow, lavender, or white. The plants bloom intermittently throughout the year. These plants bloom best in the high humidity of a greenhouse but also succeed as houseplants. One cultivar has green leaves with creamy veins; another has olive green leaves with pale stripes and red edges; still another has chocolate brown leaves with silver veins; yet another has silver leaves with darker margins.

If you can grow African violets, then try your green thumb on some of their cousins. They are sure to add variety and interest to your house plant display.

**UPCOMING ACTIVITIES:** Want to learn more about gardening and landscaping? The Master Gardeners have two upcoming activities for you. Annual rose pruning demonstrations are planned for Monday, January 16 from 1-3pm at the Old Grangeville Church near Hanford and on Saturday, January 21 from 10am to 2pm at the Tulare County Courthouse Roses in Visalia. In addition Master Gardeners have prepared table top displays on favorite gardening topics and will be available to answer your gardening questions. Visit The Master Gardener website for more information at ucanr.org/sites/UC_Master_Gardeners.

January 12, 2012