

# Sometimes laughter is the best medicine!

by Sue Hoffmann

It all started quite innocently - our quest: grow next year's Best in Show African violet. You know, there is always underlying competition among the "serious growers" in every club.

For several years I'd admired Carol's\* steering-wheel-sized Standards, while she wondered how my Trailers grew so large. She and I talked about our African violet culture: our growing areas, the amount and type of light we used, our fertilizers and methods of watering. At almost the same time, the idea was born: Create the PERFECT POTTING MIX. What a simple answer.



To this point, I'd only used Peat Moss, Vermiculite and Perlite. There must be something better than that *simple* mix. I began to read everything available and found it fascinating. There were all sorts of neat sounding things I'd never heard about: worm castings, diatomaceous earth, dried blood, Superphosphate, Rich Earth, bat guano, Iron, greensand, gypsum, bone meal. This was not only interesting, but fun!

My mission became finding all these ingredients. I traveled near and far, visiting most of the nurseries in a forty mile radius from my house.

Nitrogen, Phosphorous and Potassium/Potash are the three numbers listed on fertilizer. Nitrogen produces lush green foliage and strong stems, Phosphorous creates blossoms and aids in root growth, Potassium contributes to overall plant health. Most ingredients I added to my mix increased at least one of these elements.

Nitrogen (N): dried blood, bat guano, worm castings

Phosphorous (P): bone meal, Superphosphate

Potassium/Potash (K): wood ash, greensand

I was amazed! The results appeared quickly. My foliage was greener and buds started popping. I'd added a little of this and a little of that to different batches of my potting mix. Of course with this "success", I had to spread the word at our next meeting. In return I heard about Carol's "new mix" and her equally gorgeous plants. Oh boy! The battle was on.

I began reading about pH, fertilizers, humidity, light meters, temperature. You know, there's a lot to be considered when growing "perfect plants." The foliage was so sturdy and green, but one day I was grooming a plant and the leaves appeared a bit furry in the crown. "Oh no, mites!" I thought, as I whisked the plant off to our County Agriculture Center to be examined. Thankfully it wasn't mites, however while working with the plant, several leaves were broken. I was upset that the agent had been so rough with my plant but reasoned, "Oh well, I've got plenty of other plants." As the days went by, my leaves grew darker, even more furry and ... extremely brittle. "What's happening?," I wondered.

At the next meeting, Carol was quieter than usual. She finally said, "Well, I guess you win. I think I have mites" and then described the furry centers on her nice dark green plants. "And you know, my leaves seem stiff, almost brittle."

What started as an innocent contest for the perfect potting mix ended with furry, brittle plants and the gained knowledge that sometimes, the basics are just fine. We learned to try everything in moderation - make changes a little at a time. Our friendship not only survived, but grew through this ordeal. We did not have the winning plants that year, but we learned that laughter sometimes is the best medicine.

\*(Carol Van is AVSA's 2010 Hudson Memorial Award winner for Affiliate Leadership. She has been growing African violets for over forty years. Although this happened many years ago, we still laugh about it today.)