

Suckers

By Nancy Manozzi

Have you noticed tiny leaves coming from the stem of your African violet, not from the center or crown? These small leaves are suckers. A sucker is a tiny group of leaves that grows separately from the main plant. It can grow from the stem or "neck" or right from the crown itself. You should pluck it off as soon as you see one forming so that it doesn't affect the symmetry of the plant. You may use any object that has a sharp and/or beveled tip like a sucker plucker, toothpick, ceramic knife, nutpick, or what I usually use, my fingernail! Another option is to wait until it is large enough to remove easily and make another plant with it.

A sucker shouldn't be confused with a developing flower bud; the differences are as follows:

- 1) A sucker develops leaves that are bigger than the leaves you see on a developing flower bud
- 2) A flower bud doesn't develop more than two leaves
- 3) Usually suckers form lower on the stem, and flowering buds form towards the top.

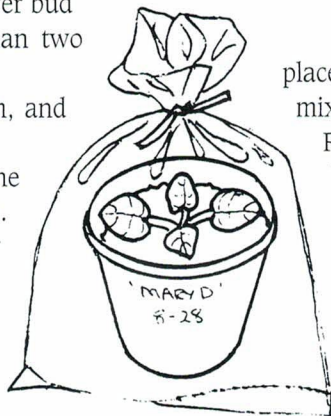
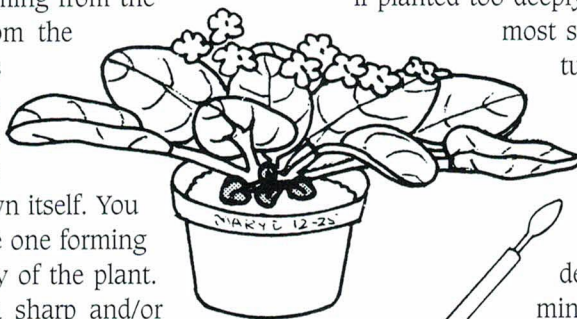
A sucker will take a lot of energy from the plant and may reduce the amount of blooms. This is because the plant is putting its energy into making another plant, not blossoms. A sucker is the plant trying to reproduce itself and stay alive. There are several reasons a plant may sucker, often having to do with one's culture, like being stressed due to poor soil, low humidity, too much or too little water, too much or too little light, or an attack of insects. They may also sucker

if planted too deeply in the pot. In my collection, I see the most suckering in semi-miniature and miniature varieties.

Some African violets sucker because it's just in their genes to do so. My 'Rob's Cool Fruit,' 'Rob's Little Pueblo,' 'Aly's Blizzard Bunny' and 'Corns A' Poppin' are constantly developing suckers. They are all either miniatures or semi miniatures. Since I really like these varieties, I often wait until the suckers are large enough, remove them, and create additional plants.

You can force a plant to sucker by pinching out the crown. The violet will push out suckers in an attempt to survive. And as I mentioned earlier, you can easily gain more plants this way, instead of waiting for leaves to root and form babies. This is also the way to reproduce chimeras, but that is a topic for another article!

Suckers are very easy to root. Just shallowly place the rootless plant into your regular, moistened soil mix. You might need to support it with a toothpick. Place the entire pot into a baggie, making sure the bag isn't touching the plant. The sucker should root within a few weeks. You will know that it has rooted by opening the bag and giving it a slight tug - if it doesn't come out of the soil it has rooted and may be gradually removed from the bag. If it hasn't rooted, leave it in the bag for a few more weeks, and try again.



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