

Olga Semova's Plant room

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When Olga Semova came to the Toronto African Violet Society show in April 2010, she fell in love with the violets she saw. She had never grown violets before, only orchids and fuschia, so she joined TAVS on the spot.

At the meetings, she quickly became friends with Olga Vertlib, a long-time TAVS member and excellent grower. Olga V. would meet with Olga S. every Saturday and mentor her and as a result, Olga S. went on to win the Best in Show at the same time as Best Novice in 2011. In 2012 a large number of TAVS members, including Olga, made the trip down to Detroit for the first-ever AVSA/AVSC joint convention. She was surrounded by her friends when she found out that she had won the Second Best in Show. We all broke out into a cheer and rushed to take a souvenir photo. At that time I knew I had to interview Olga and write about her growing secrets, however our schedules never seemed to match.

By the time we sat down for an interview, another year had passed and she had gone on to win 2013 Best in Shows for both Toronto AVS and Lakeshore AVS of Toronto, once again proving the extent of her skills.



Above: Olga with her BIS at the 2013 TAVS Show.



Above: TAVS members celebrating Olga's win at the 2012 Convention: (L-R) Doris Brownlie, Carolyn Conlin-Lane, John Brownlie, Deanna Belli, Olga Semova, Audrey Burry-Plunkett, Sayeh Beheshti, Emma Bygott, Marilyn Crompton, Jackie Mills & Julie Thomsson.

Below: Another group picture to celebrate Olga's win: (L-R): Alla Smirnova, Olga Vertlib, Olga Semova, Jackie Mills, Sayeh Beheshti, Marilyn Crompton & Audrey Burry-Plunkett.



As I walked into her beautiful basement plant room, I was immediately struck with the order and cleanliness. The room was about 15 feet by 20 feet. There was a sink with a large counter for potting plants as well as cabinets holding supplies in one corner. Her plant stands were made of tall white wire shelving units which had been fitted with shop light fixtures on chains that could be lifted or lowered to adjust the distance. Tucked away along the walls were some other shelves including two square green wire racks. Olga proudly told me that these were her first shelves where she grew her first best in show, Frozen in Time, and she just couldn't let them go.



Creating her perfect plant room was a result of trial and error. In her previous home, there had been marble floor and in the winter the temperature had ranged from 10°C (50°F) near the floor to 19°C (66.2°F) on the top shelf. Working long hours in her plant room, soon she developed health problems. When her family moved to this house and she saw the unfinished basement, she installed cork flooring and it has proven to be an excellent material.

Sayah: I can see you grow a lot of streptocarpus. Are you moving away from violets?

Olga: Violets are my favorite plants. You see a lot of streps in my collection because it's my personality. When I do something, I commit completely. I am a perfectionist and it's not enough to have just a few and I go all out. When I check the internet and see the varieties, I have to buy them all. My mother recently came over from Russia brought over a lot of different strep varieties from my friends.

She pointed to several hybrids from a very talented Ukrainian hybridizer, Pavel Enikeev, who creates the DS varieties. She lifted Strep. DS Black Cat which has magenta fantasy markings on a dark purple bloom. It was as if S. Fisher's Leone had been reincarnated as a strep! Beautiful!

Sayah: How many varieties do you have and how do you keep track of all of this?

Olga: I have 200-300 strep varieties and maybe 400 AV varieties. I have a lot of papers and I try to put them in a binder and now that I have more strep varieties, it is getting more complicated.

Olga pointed to several new Russian trailing varieties that she had recently received and I asked her about the AV scene in Russia.

Olga: There are 4 or 5 famous Russian hybridizers including one that focuses on semi-miniature and miniature violets. Those hybrids have a nice shape and rosette and also bloom well. In general, I think Russian hybridizers have a problem with over enthusiasm. I don't think that they realize the importance of growing the plant through 3 generations before registering. As soon as it blooms, and they see a beautiful bloom, they register it as a new variety. While the blooms are beautiful, the rosette may not be that good and the plant just is

not a show plant. I have cut my collection of Russian plants and now only show the good plants. Now, if I want to buy a Russian hybrid, I first call my friends in Russia and ask which ones are worth growing.

Sayeh: What tubes do you use for lights?

Olga: I use two 40 watts Philips plant and aquarium fluorescents for violets. I use one GE Eco lux F40 Plants and Aquariums and one GE



kitchen and bath 40 W daylight for streps. I usually have the light for 8 to 10 hours. I use a timer when growing to show but not on all the stands. I keep adding one hour when I am getting the plants to bloom before a show.

When I asked about the soil she uses, Olga said that in the past, she had purchased commercial AV soil mixes and sterilized it with heat before adding vermiculite and perlite to create a lighter formula. Since this is a lot of work, she has recently decided to try the Fisher's formula sold through Lakeshore AVS. She repots her standards once a year in September or October when the weather is rainy and gloomy. She takes the plant out, removes the old leaves and as much of the old soil as possible to give it fresh soil.

As we walked through the plant stands I noticed that there were some plants with individual saucers in a tray lined with a white mat.

Olga: These are semis and minis and they need more humidity than standards. I use this method to give them additional humidity, especially when the air conditioning starts. I initially went to purchase the material at a hydroponic store but it was around \$2 for a sheet. I found a similar material, a polyester batting that I purchased as a roll in a fabric store and cut to size. One important trick is that I use a drop of aquarium drops to clean the water I put on the mat otherwise algae starts to grow within a week. With the drops, I can keep the mats clean for 6 months before taking them out for a wash.



Top: Trays of semis are lined with polyester batting that is kept moist with water that has Aquarium drops (**Below**) added to it.



Sayeh: *Do you have any special tips for growing the minis and semis?*

Olga: Ideally, I would like to keep them on the lower levels since they like low temperature and high humidity but my streps also like that location.... so it's a tough decision of which plants get to go on the bottom shelf. I repot them twice a year but now I am going to change the way I grow them. I have heard one Russian expert saying that we should never fertilizer minis and semis since there is enough fertilizer in the soil.

They are small plants with small roots. I think it's true since when I originally repotted my minis and semis, they had a nice shape and rosette and amazing blooms but after I put them on the fertilizer schedule for show, the leaves became thicker and brittle and few actually made it to the show.

Sayeh: With such a large collection, how do you deal with pests?

Olga: I believe in prevention. I use AVID and Conserve once a month and spray everything. One time Olga Vertlib asked me, "why do you put the chemicals if you don't see pests?" and I told her that if I see the pests, then it's already too late. If I have to disbud, I would need a month to deal with problems, so I like to be proactive.

I also have a lot of air filters. My favorite one is this Bionaire model since it also has a UV protect light. Somehow the UV light burns out after 4 or 5 months and I have had to replace it three times already. I have not found a replacement bulb.

Sayeh: What is the UV light good for?

Olga: It takes care of powdery mildew. When I use the UV light, I don't have a problem with powdery mildew. One time I found two plants on a shelf of 10 plants with Powdery Mildew. I put the UV light next to them and went to pick up the treatment at a club meeting. By the time I returned from the meeting, the powdery mildew had disappeared. The Bionaire air purifier is enough for my entire plant room but since they have stopped production of that model, I have purchased a different model which is not as strong and I personally have to move it around the room.



Above: Germguardian UV light is a portable unit that helps control powdery mildew in Olga's collection.

Sayeh: I see your beautiful "Smokey moon" Is this the one you won BIS at TAVS and LAVS?

Olga: I actually have two Smokey Moons, both babies from the same leaf. The first one won BIS at this year's TAVS show and the other one won BIS at LAVS. Even though both plants are from the same leaf, they are different and one does not have an edge on the bloom.

Sayeh: It must take a long time to water your collection.

Olga: I spend about two hours every day since I have different pots and different shelves. If I try to do it on the same day, it will take 8 hours.

This year in February we got a notice in the mail that our municipality increased the chlorine levels. Now, when you take a shower, it smells like a swimming pool. We used to drink the tap water and I used it for watering my plants. When they increased the chlorine, I initially tried to use a Brita filter but it was not possible since I needed about 2 gallons per day. After two weeks I noticed a big problem with my plants with leaves becoming yellow, so I started to boil the water, let it cool and pour it over a cotton mesh to filter it. Since then, the new leaves are growing as a nice vibrant green, but the older leaves are damaged and have stayed yellow. I am hoping to get a water filtration system soon.

By now, we had walked through the room and reached the sink and counter which had an assortment of bottles and containers and looked like an apothecary.



1. Mycrose Pro bacterial additive
2. DNF two part fertilizer
3. Sensi Grow two part fertilizer

Sayeh: What products do you use for your plants?

Olga: I buy a lot of products in a hydroponic store. One of my favourite products is a two-part fertilizer called Sensi Grow from DNF (Dutch Nutrient Formula). There are different types for leaf growth or blooming and I use them quarter strength with every watering.

Fish formula is also another fertilizer I use but it can be smelly. For emergency potting before show I use the plant starter. It's for blooms but also stimulates rooting. I use a small portion of superthrive monthly

One interesting fertilizer that I use is Worm juice. I use granules for topsoil and it will give you huge blooms. It does not cause any problems with streps but can be very dangerous for African violets and must be used with caution. If you use too much, you get very tight leaves. It is good for single colored blooms but if your plant has multicolored blooms, this fertilizer will cause the darker color to overtake.



1.Hydroplex Fertilizer 2.Sensigrow two part fertilizer 3.Plant Starter(10-52-10) 4.Bioroot root booster(1-1-1) 5.Grotek-Fishplus fish fertilizer blend(5-1-1) 6.DNF Bloom fortifier(0-50-30), 7.Superthrive

Below: Olga's secret ingredient to use for revitalizing streps is a tea that she makes from horse manure she collects from her horses.



My favorite fertilizer is the horse manure. I collect the fresh manure from my own horses since they only eat hay and grass and vegetables. I bring it in and put it on the tray to dry inside the house. Once it's dry, I use three tablespoons and add it to 5 litres of hot water and let it sit for a day or two. After I water the streps with it, the results are unbelievable: the next day the leaves become greener and plumper. It is very good for streps but I only use it for my African violets when I report.

She also showed me a container of Mycrose Pro Bacteria that she buys from the same hydroponic store. She mixes one teaspoon in water and adds to her waterings and it takes care of the problem of fungus growing on soil. It also makes the soil smell fresh.

Sayeh: *I see you have a pet soap, what do you use that for?*

Olga: I wash my old pots with this soap and also add two drops in my Conserve mix to spray monthly on my plants.



Above: Mycrose Pro is a bacterial additive, **Below: (L-R):** Hartz Rid flea and tick shampoo is used for washing dirty pots and also monthly sprays; Lysol is used for cleaning and soap for regular hand-washing.



I thanked Olga for taking the time to show me her plant room and sharing her growing tips and techniques so generously. On my drive home, I contemplated the many new things I had learnt and realized that the most important thing I was taking away from this interview was the importance of keeping an open mind and customizing tools and techniques that work within your specific conditions.