

Roundtable Chatter

In this feature section, our panel of experts from all over the world answer the same question. If you want to submit a question, please email it to: chatter@avsc.ca



Question: How do you treat the roots when you repot African violets?



Anne Brown – Halifax, NS

Anne has been growing and showing African Violets and other Gesneriads since 1993. She is a Senior AVSA Judge and an AVSA Teacher.

I have had good success when I disturb the roots as little as possible when I repot. This is especially true when potting up immature standards. I use the mould method to repot young standards into larger pots, which makes it easy not to disturb the roots, and I find the plants experience very little, if any, set-back in their growth. When potting up minis and semis from starter cups to 2.5 inch pots there is not enough difference in the size of the pots to use the mould potting method easily; but, I try not to disturb the roots on these plants either.

When repotting more mature plants, I still follow the philosophy of minimal root disturbance, however, I like to provide a layer of new soil all around the root ball for these plants so they can grow new roots into fresh soil. To this end, I will always remove some roots and soil from the bottom of the root ball and often around the sides as well. In addition, I slough off the soil from the top of the root ball which helps keep fertilizer salt build up at a minimum. I try and watch plants that have experienced a significant amount of root disturbance carefully, and often place them in a baggie or under a dome for several weeks to help them get back on their “feet”.



Ruth Coulson - Australia

Ruth has been growing African violets for over 35 years, but believes there is still plenty to learn. Her hobby has taken her from a few plants on a window sill, to a large collection that gave rise to the material for several books on growing African Violets.

How much root disturbance there needs to be when repotting depends upon the state of the plant. Where potting the plant from a small pot into a larger one I like to disturb the roots as little as possible, unless the roots have grown into a tight mass because the plant has been left in its small pot for too long. At the right stage for repotting the roots should be just holding the mix together but are not bound tightly. The mass of roots is just placed in the new, slightly larger pot on a cushion of potting mix with more mix filled in around it. I like to moisten the mix by standing the pot for a short while in a shallow saucer of water. After that I resume water and fertiliser. The plant never “knows” it has been repotted, continuing to grow with no pause at all.

If the plant has been in its pot for a long time the situation is quite different. Where the plant is simply due for repotting because some rows of leaves

have been removed leaving an unsightly neck, it can be done with minimal root disturbance. What I do is to slide the root ball out of the pot. I inspect the roots and if they are not tightly bound together I simply slice a piece of the root ball off with a sharp knife. This is about the length of any neck that I am trying to hide, plus a little. I then put some fresh potting mix in the bottom of a clean pot, place the plant in position and fill in with fresh mix. This is very quick to do and the plant is pretty happy to just keep on growing.

If the roots are tightly bound together, then a more drastic approach is called for. It is probably time to remove as much of the potting mix as possible and give the plant a fresh start. My favourite tool for this is a bamboo skewer, a very handy implement for jobs of this sort. I let the potting mix be rather dry before starting and after removing the plant from the pot gently comb the bamboo skewer through the roots until most of the mix has been removed. Once that is done it will usually be obvious that there are many more roots than the plant will need when placed back in its pot. If I have removed a number of outside leaves I may re-pot into a smaller pot. After the roots are trimmed, I pot up with fresh mix. Plants treated like this need a little extra care before they become established again. I prefer to keep them barely moist for a week and then water with plain water for at least another week before using fertiliser.

The most drastic root disturbance of all is when the whole root ball is cut off and the top of the plant is stripped of many of its leaves and planted as a cutting to grow all over again. I reserve this for any plant that has been seriously neglected (it happens!) or where infestation or infection of the roots is suspected. Such a plant will take longer to recover and demands greater care with watering and fertilising until it has produced a proper amount of roots.



Arleen Dewell – Vancouver, BC

Arleen has actively been growing and exhibiting African Violets and related Gesneriads for 27 years. She is the Past-President of the Vancouver African Violet & Gesneriad Society. She served for many years on the Gesneriad Society's Board of Directors in various capacities and currently Chairs its Shows and Judging Committee.

I have always repotted African violets, taking great care not to disturb their roots during the process. The root ball of an African violet that is ready for repotting will fill nearly all the available space in its present container. I gently ease the plant out of its pot and carefully check it for the development of healthy, white roots while it is temporarily un-potted.

African violet roots have thousands of tiny hairs along each root structure that aid in the absorption of water and nutrients from the soil mixture. If one disturbs the root ball too much, many of those delicate root hairs could be damaged or destroyed. Having said that, African violets with vigorous root systems do just fine, when a portion of their root balls are trimmed off to deal with a long a neck, or in cases where miniature and semi-miniature African violets are required to remain within specified leaf diameters and pot sizes.



Karyn Cichocki – Lafayette, NJ

Karyn comes from a family of gardeners and has been interested in indoor and outdoor gardening since childhood. She joined her first violet club in 1982 and became a AVSA judge in 1984. She is currently a Senior AVSA judge and Master Gesneriad Society judge.

When I transplant AV standards I try not to disturb the roots as it seems to slow them down more in my conditions. On mature minis and semis, when I'm re-potting into the same size pot to freshen the soil, I do cut about a 1/4" from the bottom of the root ball, so there is room for fresh soil. Doing this to these smaller plants doesn't seem to affect them.



Winston Goretsky - Calgary, AB

Winston is a past president of AVSC, a Master Judge as well as a Judge's Teacher. He is currently serving AVSA as Vice President. He has been growing African Violets and Gesneriads since about 1974, and loves to encourage others by sharing his knowledge and enthusiasm about his favourite plant.

My general rule of thumb for repotting is that the existing plant is in one of the following categories:

A younger plant either ready to be moved up to a larger pot size, which should allow the plant to reach its full potential.

An older plant which has exhausted its soil and needs to be rejuvenated or refreshed.

In the case of a younger plant being potted up to a larger size pot, I usually make a mould in the larger pot with the soil firmed around an empty pot of the same size as the plant being potted up is currently growing in. The objective is to encourage the roots to grow into the new soil surrounding the old root ball.

Using a sharp knife or blade, cut vertical strips, to a depth of 1.5-2 cm (1/2 inch), evenly around the root ball from top to bottom.

The old root ball is easily placed into the mould created by an earlier step and the soil gently firmed around the plant. New roots should begin to quickly grow into the new soil and the plant should show signs of new and vigorous growth within a few weeks.

An older plant may have produced a neck from outer leaves being removed as the plant has aged. The plant will need to be removed from the pot and set down into the same size pot in which it is currently growing.

The length of the neck determines the amount which needs to be removed from the bottom of the soil ball to allow the crown of the plant to be level with the lip of the pot.

As the plant ages, and the roots grow old and tired, they may not be as useful or as efficient as they were when younger. New roots are always best

encouraged to gain vigor and health. The bottom portion of the root ball is already being removed to allow the plant to be set down to the correct depth and will be growing new roots from that area. The neck of the plant will also produce roots if encouraged by scraping the dry callous and exposing fresh tissue. Rooting hormone may be applied if you choose, as this will help prevent crown rot and also encourage rapid root growth. Many growers find good results with or without using the rooting hormone, so it becomes an experiential preference.

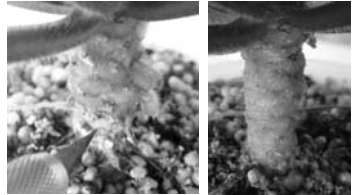


Stanley Ko - Hong Kong

Stanley has been growing and hybridizing African violets for the past 25 years. As the first hybridizer in Hong Kong, he has devoted his efforts into creating unique chimeras that are sought by collectors around the world.

"When and How" to repot plants is the most-often asked question by novice growers in meetings. Most novice growers think that the process is time consuming and not easy to manage. I have personally noticed that they are often unsure about the following items:

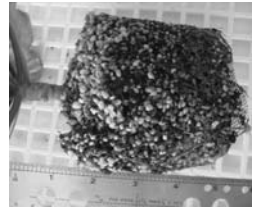
Recycling the Soil – due to environmental concerns novice growers tend to reuse their soil to repot plants, wondering why the growth of plant gets worse. Used soil not only becomes acidic and may also be infested with invisible insects so we should always use fresh soil to repot plants .



Above: Scraping the neck to encourage new roots;
Below: cutting the rootball

Soil Removal – When novice growers repot plants, they are often under the false impression that they must completely wash away all the soil with water. Unfortunately, this damages the root system and weakens the plants.

Many don't realize that plants can be repotted any time or in any season. In my own growing environment, I use labels to record the plant's next repotting date and stick it on the pot for reference. When the plant reaches that date, I repot it.



The procedure of repotting plants actually depends on the plant's growing condition in addition to the size of pot required for repotting. It should be considered on a case by case basis using the following chart:



Pot Size	Plant Condition (Long Neck)	Plants Repotting Method
Same	No	Remove 1/3 root ball and repot with fresh soil
	Yes	Remove the skin of long neck and 1/2 root ball Repot with fresh soil and also cover the long neck
Larger	No	Don't remove root ball and just requires repot with fresh soil
	Yes	Remove the skin of long neck Remove the length of root ball depending the size of pot Repot with fresh soil and also cover the long neck