

DOUBTING THOMAS
A Conversation with Bill Foster
on Growing and Hybridizing
by Margery Clive

MC: When and where were you introduced to African violets?

BF: Well, it was the mid to late 60's (I knew about violets, but never had one). I became interested when a friend and former neighbor (we used to play cards with on Saturday nights) gave me a plant. It looked very healthy, but it wouldn't bloom. So, I thought to myself, "This little sucker isn't going to beat me". Now, the plant looked so good, and I was so intrigued, I started reading everything I could find on African Violets. At this point, I didn't know anything about AVSA, but after reading about violets I became very interested in their origin, and found through my research that the reason the plant wasn't blooming was because it didn't have proper light. My interest was peaked even further when Paula (who was working at Wards) bought me a double four foot. Grow Light fixture. At that point, I built a two-tier shelf and used one shelf for growing and the other shelf to hold my supplies.

Then one day I made a trip to Volkmann Bros. Greenhouse and bought three plants. I never figured that my one shelf wouldn't be enough room for my collection. Arriving home, I dropped one of the violets (*Texas Bouquet*) which, by the way, was a sport of *Black Magic*. Doing my best to salvage the plant, I broke 5 leaves off, and as you know, when you are a new grower, you can't throw any of the leaves away. Needless to say, I put down all 5 leaves and wound up with 50 plants. Of course you can guess where this is going; everyone who came to our house, left with a *Texas Bouquet* whether they wanted one or not!

MC: Were you growing other plants at the time?

BF: Yes. I was growing houseplants and outdoor plants and because of my general interest in plant culture, I had read about miniature violets (they were not very good back then) and I had experimented with terrariums and dish gardens. Mind you, this two-tier shelf would have lasted until today but for one fateful night when Paula and I were at Sears. They had just gotten a new shipment of violets. One of them happened to be *Chanticleer* and Paula fell in love with *Chanticleer*. So from then on, the hobby started growing and that's when Paula got involved.



Ozio



Bertha

One Saturday I stopped at another one of the nurseries I visited regularly. That day they had a self-watering planter, a new African violet pot called an Aquamatic Planter. The lady at the nursery told me that the distributor was Swift's African Violets. June Swift was just in the process of opening her first AV shop located at Maylee and Ferguson in E. Dallas. So I paid a visit to her violet shop. June didn't have it completed inside; fortunately, at that time in her remodeling, there wasn't a gate that kept you from going back into her growing area. She actually invited me back into her growing area and right away I became a "regular". Soon she became my mentor and invited us to a meeting at the First Nighter African Violet Society. Not long after that, I obtained more violets and we started planning new

growing spaces. I couldn't grow them fast enough . . . I couldn't build light stands fast enough. They were crowding us out of our house! There were shelves in every room. Whenever June Swift went to the conventions, Paula would tend her shop and take her pay in Aquamatic Planters and later Moist-Rite planters.

We joined First Nighter AVS. The club hadn't had a show in a few years, but with several new members, they decided to have a show. The show was in the garden center of Sears on Ross Avenue in Dallas. Much to our surprise, Paula and I had 12 entrees in the show, won 7 blue ribbons and 2 Best-In-Class. One of the Best-In-Class was a novel container with *Nancy Reagan* as the Best-In-Class violet. I later sold *Nancy Reagan* to Sue Whitfield., a very insistent and later a very dear friend, who was a member of First AVS of Dallas, the *other* club in town. After that experience, our interest just progressed even more. One of the other favorites that I grew in the beginning I would really like to have again was called *A Touch of Spring*, a white violet with green tips.

MC: How have your growing techniques changed over the years?

BF: Well, of course, you know we enclosed the patio to try to get the plants out of the house, but I mis-measured and all of my plant stands wouldn't get into the room we had built just for them. So we still had some in the house, but at least not in every room.

MC: At what point did you build your violet house?

BF: After I retired, I had become quite active in AVSA and needed storage space for AVSA files for judges, officers, and affiliate papers. At that point, what once had been the violet room now became my office and that's when the violets were moved to their own carpeted, climate-controlled home where they live today. However, there is still one stand in the house and that's for any overflow and for isolation of plants that we bring back from the convention.

MC: What led you to take an interest in hybridizing, and what was the name of your first introduction?

BF: Well, I was quite impressed when I read about the species and how far we had come from the little purple and blue singles. I was prompted to do my first cross when I read an article that stated if you used pollen from a pure strain which at that time, there were pure Rhapsody and Ballet strains, solid colors with nothing else in their background and crossed it on any plant of a different color, all your seedlings would be the color of the pure strain parent. I questioned this and seriously doubted this information, so I took pollen from a solid blue Rhapsody and crossed it onto a very pretty pink violet, Maas' *Mary C* and, sure enough, lo and behold, all of the babies in the first cross were solid blue – every one of them – just like the article had stated! One we named *Merrill* and registered. The reason we named it *Merrill* was because Alpha AVS was getting ready to install their first president, Merrill Schneider, and we wanted to use it for the club's first installation program. That first hybridizing experience really peaked my interest even more. Now, I wanted to experiment with developing variegated violets because they had become my favorites.



Greg



Glenda Sue

MC: Tell me about your favorite and most famous hybrid.

BF: My favorite hybrid was *Billy Blue*. It had lovely variegated foliage and a nice blue blossom and grew it for 30+ years until recently when I lost it. I would love it if anyone growing it, would send me some leaves or a starter plant. For 2 or 3 years running, *Billy Blue* was the favorite plant in the state based on a yearly survey conducted for the LSAVC Newsletter. The winners were announced at the LSAVC conventions. My most famous hybrid has been *Bertha*, but there have been many. To name a few: *Sweet Paula*, *First Dallas*, *Greg*, *Wilson Rhea*, *Daring Debs*, *Margery's Melody*, *Molly's Folly*, and of course *Ozio*, which has been a favorite in the south.

MC: Would you share your worst experience?**BF:** I can remember two:

At one time we did community wicking. If you choose to community wick, do so very carefully and *never ever* put a plant on your community wicking system unless you are absolutely sure that it does not have soil mealy bugs. A few years into this, it happened to us, and we decided that after throwing out large numbers of plants, it would be better to wick individually.

My most horrifying experience happened a few years ago when I walked into my violet house to find that it was 110 degrees inside. The air conditioner had gone down. You would be surprised how resilient and stable the violets are. Of the hundreds, possibly thousands of violets, we only lost about 50 plants. Most of them snapped back from shock after we broke them down and repotted them. This was a real test of how much violets can endure under stress.



**Colonel
Ron**

Here are Bill's 10 key points that he has learned over the years:

- 1) Growing violets is a terminal disease;
- 2) There is no cure, but you can get temporary relief by buying new varieties;
- 3) You must learn to throw away leaves;
- 4) You must concentrate (especially if you are in a club) on growing plants that are show quality and AVSA registered. You will be attracted to many plants with the most beautiful blossoms and lousy foliage;
- 5) Keep only a few of your non-show quality favorites. The foliage will never improve when it's bad to begin with;
- 6) Remember to isolate your new purchases;
- 7) Think twice before community wicking;
- 8) When hybridizing, select plants with strong characteristics that will produce winning plants. Select the mother (pollen receiving) plant for the foliage you are looking for. The father (pollen donor) plant should possess a blossom types and/or color that you wish to attain in your new hybrids;
- 9) Wicking individually will prevent the transmission of disease;
- 10) African Violets will bring dear friends, not only locally, but from all over the world. Many of the friends we have met are like family and the thing is you continue to meet new friends constantly. This is probably the most positive reason to get involved in growing African violets!