

Why African Violets?

by Sonja Behnke Festerling

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any times I have been asked this question — why did my parents, Rose and Albert Behnke, decide to specialize in African Violets?

The answer takes me back to the mid 1940's when I was in elementary school. Every day, mom took the bus to Washington, D.C. where she worked as a secretary at the IBEW— the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. During school vacation times I liked to do simple embroidery. This, sort of, was the start of something big and I *don't* mean exciting breakthroughs in embroidery.

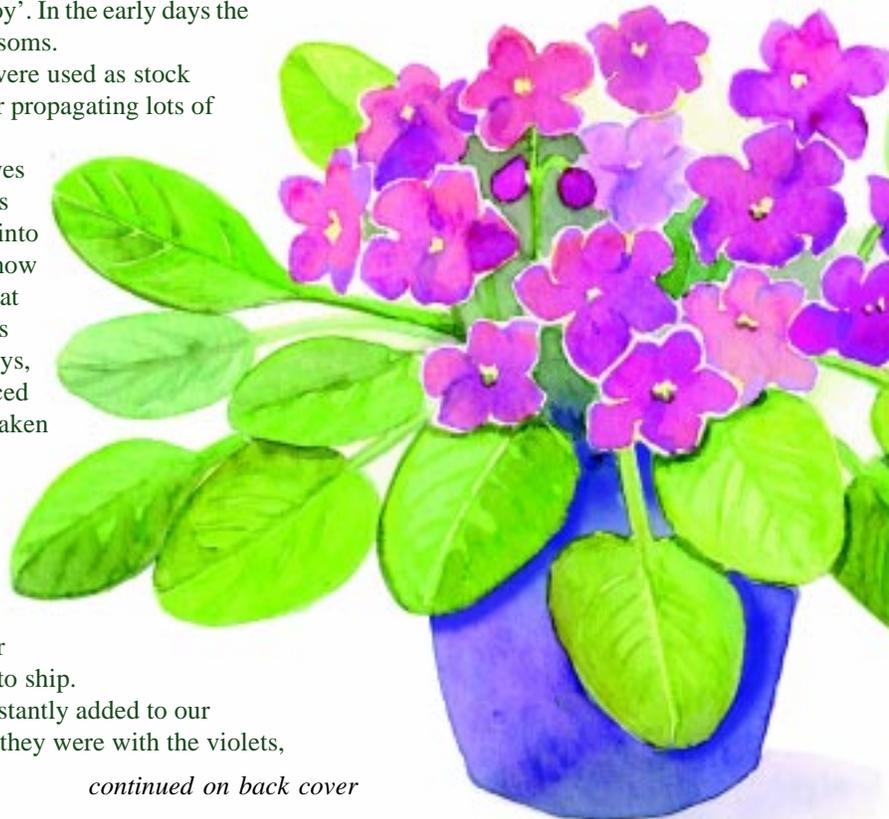
A neighbor lady offered to help me with my embroidery and give me tips when I got stuck. While at her home in Beltsville, I noticed the pretty, dark blue flowers sitting in her window sills and asked about them. She gave me one with instructions on how to care for it—also, and this is important to the story — she told me to “cut off a leaf, put the stem in a little jar of water, and you'll grow lots of baby African violets!”

I did just what she told me, and it worked, which aroused the interest of my nurseryman father. My mother researched African violets by corresponding with commercial growers and writers on the subject. She joined the African Violet Society and they provided a wealth of information. Behnke Nurseries' African violet production began with the purchase of a handful of plants such as the species *Saintpaulia ionantha*, and varieties including 'Blue Boy', 'Blue Girl', and 'Mentor Boy'. In the early days the varieties all had single blossoms.

Those first specimens were used as stock plants, or mother plants, for propagating lots of new plants. As my brother Roland remembers, the leaves from the outer ring of leaves were removed and “stuck” into trays of damp sand: that's how we grew them. He recalls that every evening young plants were harvested from the trays, wrapped in newspaper, placed into cardboard boxes, and taken to the Beltsville post office. During late Spring, Summer and early Fall we shipped violets all over the country. Depending on the time of year, it took anywhere from 4 months to a half a year for plants to grow big enough to ship.

New varieties were constantly added to our stock plant list. As busy as they were with the violets,

continued on back cover



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GARDEN CENTER HOURS

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(www.behnkes.com)

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Meet: Byrne Kelly



Licensed Landscape Architect Byrne Kelly manages the Design & Installation Division for Behnke Nurseries.

As the child of a Foreign Service Officer, Byrne, who was born in London, England, had the good fortune of living in many interesting places, including Khartoum, Sudan, and Brussels, Belgium. During his college (Williams) and graduate school (Conway) years, he lived on both coasts of the United States, including Washington State, California, and Massachusetts. He spent ten years in the U.S. Coast Guard Reserve out of Annapolis.

In his spare time, Byrne enjoys sports, including coaching kids' soccer teams, playing soccer himself, and 25 years of competing in the team sport of Ultimate Frisbee. He also does a lot of citizen activism with school grounds, transportation and environmental issues, including wetland and woodland mitigation banking in Maryland.

Byrne resides in Takoma Park, Maryland with his wife, Ginny, and their two children, Clara, 10, and Tyler, 13. A foxhound, Otis and two sibling cats, Sparky and Milky complete the household. Keeping up with the kids' interests and upbringing and sustaining his marriage of 18 years absorbs much of his energy, he says, as well the regular chores and upkeep of his house, which was built in 1933 and requires continual upgrading.

Free Landscape Design!

Throughout January 2004 at Behnke's Beltsville.

Bring in plans, house location survey, and photos—we'll provide thumbnail sketches and design suggestions. The first half-hour session is free! Additional time is available at \$25 per half hour. By appointment only, Monday through Friday 9AM-4PM. Please call 301-937-1100.

Pre-Registration Workshops

For the do-it-yourselfer, see the Landscape Design Workshop in the insert in this issue of GardeNews.



Job Fairs

When: Saturday, February 7, 9AM to 5PM.

Where: Behnke's Production Facility in Largo, Maryland.

Who: Job seekers who would enjoy working with plants.

When: Wednesday, February 18, 5PM to 8PM and

Saturday, February 21, 9AM to 5PM.

Where: At all three Behnke locations (see box at left).

Who: Job seekers who would enjoy working with customers and plants in our retail garden centers.

For more information, call Behnke's Human Resource Department at 301-937-1100 or consult our website: www.behnkes.com.



Be Prepared — Get the Groundwork Done Early

— by Jim Dronenburg, Harpist and Plant Specialist

This is the classic “do as I say, not as I do” article. When you know that you are going to the nursery to get a tree, a shrub, whatever, to fill a spot, consider preparing or amending the soil beforehand. There’s a fair deal of work involved, and it’s a kindness to both you and the plant to get the grunt work out of the way. Then you can come home with your plants, and just pop them in.

“When you know that you are going to the nursery to get a tree, a shrub, whatever, to fill a spot, consider preparing or amending the soil beforehand.”

Take it from one who’s learned the hard way. My whole patio and around one side of my house is filled— granted, some things are my house plants out for the summer, but most are larger, outside things I got in fits of acquisitiveitis, and have stood out there reproaching me ever since. Plays hob with your water bill, too.

In my own particular case, my soil is solid clay. To plant a tree, I need to dig a crater, lug in amendment stuff (compost, manure, sand if that is what the plant needs, peat moss ditto), and dig it in. Not according to the size the plant *is*, oh no! but to the size that the plant *will grow to be*.

Not that we want you to stop impulse buying! Impulse purchasers are our dearest friends, our bread and butter. But what seemed so easy a job when you bought the plant often turns out to be more work than you have time for upon return. And you usually will have forgotten something, peat, mulch, whatever. The plant will fare

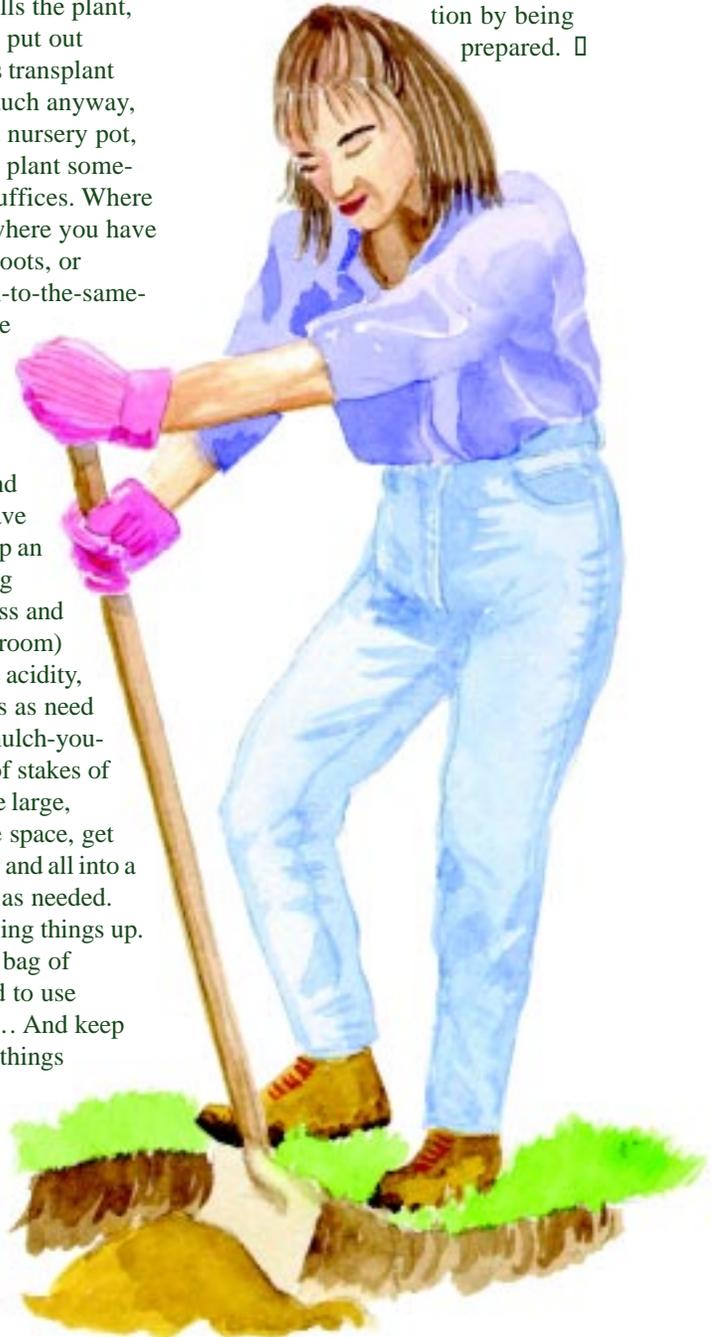
far better with us, where we will remember to water it daily, than with you for a week, which seems to be the period between available labor times for most people.

It helps to have a checklist. Will the plant need staking? Will it need peat? Compost? Do you have *Plant Starter*? (Note: *Plant Starter* is a weak fertilizer solution which essentially tells the plant, “Shut up, suck up water and put out roots.” It virtually eliminates transplant shock. There shouldn’t be much anyway, just popping a plant out of a nursery pot, but use it anyway, when you plant something and water it in. Once suffices. Where the stuff works wonders is where you have to dig something up by the roots, or separate things that came six-to-the-same-soil-ball; you hardly even see leaves drooping, and the plant usually thrives thereafter, even if you move it at a bad time of year.)

And, checklist or no, I tend to forget things. So, if you have room, it is a Good Idea to keep an extra stash of plant starter (big bottles are cheaper), peat moss and fine pine mulch (as you have room) to dig into the soil & increase acidity, a bag of sand for those plants as need it, an extra bag of whatever-mulch-you-use-on-top. Lay in a supply of stakes of various sizes, especially some large, *heavy* stakes. If you have the space, get BIG bags of fertilizer. Put bag and all into a watertight container and use as needed. Keep a supply of twine for tying things up. I suppose you should keep a bag of compost, too, although I tend to use everything I get, on the spot... And keep some of the plastic pots that things came in. Over time they are quite useful, and if you cram things onto your windowsills as I do, you will find that the square pots perennials come in fit more tightly than round ones into a tray or into a cold frame.

And try to keep your storage organized, so that you don’t have to break your neck every time you want something. *I said, this was “do as I say”....*

For those that have no storage space, and many and many in the Metro area do not, I do apologize. But for those who do, you can save yourselves time and aggravation by being prepared. □





Workshops & Free Gardening Seminars

February 7th through April 18th, 2004, at Behnke's Beltsville.
Please call to reserve your seat: 301-937-1100.

GARDENING BASICS #WS100

Saturday, Bob and Nicole Stewart, Horticulturists
Feb. 7, A primer for beginning gardeners. Learn the language and practices of growing plants, and the basics of soil preparation.
10AM

COMPOSTING AND MULCHES #WS101

Saturday, Dr. Frank Gouin, University of Maryland, retired
Feb. 7, Great gardens grow from great soil: ask any horticulturist. Learn techniques for making compost, and proper mulching techniques and materials.
1PM

THOUGHTS ON GARDEN DESIGN #WS102

Sunday, Jan Lowery, Second Nature Horticulture Design & Maintenance and John Peter Thompson, Behnke Nurseries
Feb. 8, Learn to size up the existing features of your outdoor space and apply professional design principles to create a unified landscape scheme.
1PM

BRING NATURE INDOORS WITH HOUSEPLANTS #WS103

Saturday, Kelly Swartz, Horticulturist, Willow Run Company
Feb. 14, Surround your family with living beauty in the form of foliage and flowering houseplants that anyone can grow. Also learn about caring for indoor plants year round.
10AM

GROWING ORCHIDS IN YOUR HOME #WS104

Saturday, Carol Allen, Orchid Expert
Feb. 14, Discover the wide variety of orchids available to the home gardener and learn the secrets to success with these beautiful yet surprisingly easy to grow exotic plants.
1PM

HERBS TO DELIGHT THE SENSES #WS105

Sunday, Dr. Arthur O. Tucker, Co-Author, Encyclopedia of Herbs
Feb. 15, Herbs gardens can be plain or fancy, functional or frivolous. But they are always beautiful and offer fulfillment of the senses. Learn to design a beautiful and useful garden of herbs.
1PM

THE HOME VINEYARD #WS106

Saturday, Lewis Parker, Willowcroft Farm Vineyards
Feb. 21, Find out how easy, fun and rewarding it can be to grow your own grapes and make your own wine.
10AM

COMMON MALADIES OF FRUITS & VEGETABLES #WS107

Saturday, Ethel Dutky, Director of Plant Diseases Diagnostic Lab, U of MD
Feb. 21, What you don't know can significantly reduce your home garden yield. Learn to avoid, thwart or counter attack the pests that would invade your fruit and vegetable gardens.
1PM

WOODY NATIVE PLANTS WITH YEAR ROUND INTEREST #WS108

Sunday, Deborah Herr Cornwell, Landscape Architect
Feb. 22, Learn about native plant selections that offer multi-season interest, in the form of flowers, colorful foliage, berries, and more.
1PM

EARLY SPRING GARDENING #WS109

Saturday, Randy Best, Horticulturist, Behnke Staff
Feb. 28, There is much you can do in late winter and early spring to prepare for the upcoming growing season — many plants can go into the ground now!
10AM

CONTROLLING PESTS IN VEGETABLE GARDENS #WS110

Saturday, Jon Traunfeld, U of MD Home and Garden Information Center
Feb. 28, Learn the tips, tricks, home remedies, and tried-and-true solutions to the age-old problem of bugs in the garden — without over-reliance on harmful pesticides.
1PM

FAVORITE AZALEAS FOR WASHINGTON GARDENS #WS111

Sunday, Harry Weiskittel, Marshy Point Nursery
Feb. 29, These beautiful, blooming evergreens form the backbone for many a spring-blooming landscape. Find out which varieties perform best in our climate, and how to care for them.
1PM

Workshops: Pre-Registration Required

LANDSCAPE DESIGN WORKSHOP: \$60 #WP001

Saturday, Byrne Kelly, RLA, and Roger Galvin, CPH
March 6, Work closely with top professionals to develop a comprehensive plan to transform your yard into a beautiful outdoor living space. Bring in unfinished plans, house location survey, and photos of both your house and landscape. Our staff will help you complete the design process. You'll draw your own designs with our guidance. Limited to 20 participants.
10AM-2PM
Bring your bag lunch

LIVING FLOWER ARRANGEMENT WORKSHOP: \$40 #WP002

Saturday, Brent Heath, Brent and Becky's Bulbs
April 10, Participants will create containers of brilliantly colored blooming bulbs that will bloom in splendor next summer to enhance deck, patio, porch or balcony. Each participant will take home a pot of summer-flowering bulbs. All materials will be provided, bring gloves if desired. Limited to 20 participants.
1PM

Please call 301-937-1100 to pre-register and reserve your seat.

Free Gardening Seminars at Behnke's, continued

DESIGNING A WATER FEATURE

#WS112

Sunday, *Chris Bartoli, Aquatic Artisans*
March 7, Incorporate the basic element of water to create a balanced
1PM and beautiful garden. Discover the possibilities, as well as the
basics of construction and/or installation of a water feature.

FAVORITE WOODY PLANTS

#WS113

Saturday, *Helmut Jaehnigen, Horticulturist, Behnke Staff*
March 13, Peek into the "best of" album of this seasoned nurseryman
10AM and longtime Behnke horticulturist. You'll be delighted to
discover some wonderful gems that will perform beautifully.

ENCOURAGING BIRDS YEAR ROUND

#WS114

Saturday, *Cean Laverty, Wild Bird Delight*
March 13, Fill your garden with brilliant color and beautiful song. Learn
1PM which seed and seed mixes attract the most desirable birds,
and how to place feeders for optimum success.

SPRING LAWN CARE

#WS115

Sunday, *Rick Hardie, Lebanon Seaboard Corporation*
March 14, Learn to spruce up your lawn this spring — whether you
1PM need a quick fix or a total renovation, these methods will
have a big impact on the quality of your lawn.

BASIC VEGETABLE GARDENING

#WS116

Saturday, *Cindy Brown, Green Spring Gardens Park*
March 20, Our long growing season affords area gardeners ample choice
10AM of vegetable plants to grow. Learn about planting schedules,
selection and practical growing methods.

ORNAMENTAL ALTERNATIVES — EDIBLES INSTEAD!

#WS117

Saturday, *Cindy Brown, Green Spring Gardens Park*
March 20, Cultivate edible plants in the ornamental landscape. Discover
1PM plants that are attractive enough to grow in the front yard —
and show up on your table as a part of a delicious meal.

EXCITING NEW ANNUALS

#WS118

Sunday, *Chris Corwin, Ball Seed Company*
March 21, Treat yourself to a sneak preview of the up and coming stars
1PM of the annual garden. Learn which annuals will be available in
the spring, and plan your borders in style.

SUCCESS WITH ROSES

#WS119

Saturday, *Jerry Amoroso, Weeks Roses*
March 27, Roses, like prima donnas, have an undeserved reputation for
10AM being "difficult." And while they may be prickly, roses can
be grown with minimal effort for maximum result.

INTERESTING, OR UNDER-APPRECIATED WOODY PLANTS

#WS120

Saturday, *Dan Czarniak, Pride's Corner Farms*
March 27, Discover some fabulous woody plants that might otherwise
1PM have escaped your notice. See what's new from one of the
biggest growers in the Northeast.

HOW TO PROPAGATE YOUR OWN PERENNIALS

#WS121

Sunday, *Andre Viette, Nationally Recognized Perennial Expert*
March 28, Learn proper techniques to propagate your perennials,
1PM including taking cuttings, preparing soil for young plants and
caring for new plants as they move to the garden.

EXCITING CONTAINER GARDENS

#WS122

Saturday, *Eric Morrison, Horticulturist*
April 3, Let your imagination run wild with surprising plant
10AM combinations and innovative container ideas. Planting tips
and long term care will be discussed.

GREAT GROUND COVERS TO AVOID ENGLISH IVY

#WS123

Saturday, *Phil Normandy, Brookside Gardens*
April 3, Responsible gardeners will find new ways to resolve problem
1PM areas or fulfill design requirements without resorting to ivy, an
invasive and often environmentally disastrous plant.

SANDY'S FAVORITE UNDER-USED PERENNIALS

#WS124

Sunday, *Sandy McDougal, Sandy's Plants*
April 4, Discover these wonderful perennials that have gone
1PM unnoticed in recent years, yet continue to perform beauti-
fully with attractive foliage and beautiful blooms.

TROPICAL & TEMPERATE BULBS FOR SUMMER GARDENS

#WS125

Saturday, *Brent Heath, Brent and Becky's Bulbs*
April 10, Just as they do in spring, warm season bulbs pack a wallop
10AM in the garden. Learn to design color borders, hanging baskets
and container gardens using brilliantly colored summer bulbs.

CRITTERPROOF AND RESISTANT BULBS

#WS126

Saturday, *Brent Heath, Brent and Becky's Bulbs*
April 10, Learn simple and effective measures to protect your colorful
1PM bulb displays from the disappointing ravages of voles,
squirrels and other pests.

NATURE'S CULTIVARS: BEST NATIVE PERENNIALS

#WS127

Saturday, *David Culp, Sunny Border Nurseries*
April 17, There are many varieties of native plants available. Get to
10AM know the showiest and hardiest ones for the East Coast.

WOODY PLANTS SHOWCASE

#WS128

Saturday, *Jeff Karpa, Hines Nurseries*
April 17, Discover some up-and-coming varieties of clematis and other
1PM well-behaved vines, as well as the scoop on new woody
plants on the horticultural horizon.

MARYLAND NATIVE PERENNIALS

#WS129

Sunday, *Dr. Sara Tangren, Chesapeake Native Nursery*
April 18, Native plants celebrate the beauty of our local flora, preserve
1PM our environment and help foster diversity. Sarah's nursery
sells only plants grown from seed of local ecotypes. Learn
why this is important!

Please note: These events are held at our Beltsville location, in our Assembly Room on the second floor. We regret that this room is not accessible to handicapped persons. We will, however, try to accommodate anyone who may be inconvenienced. Space is limited, to register, please call 301-937-1100.

Why African Violets, *continued from page 1*

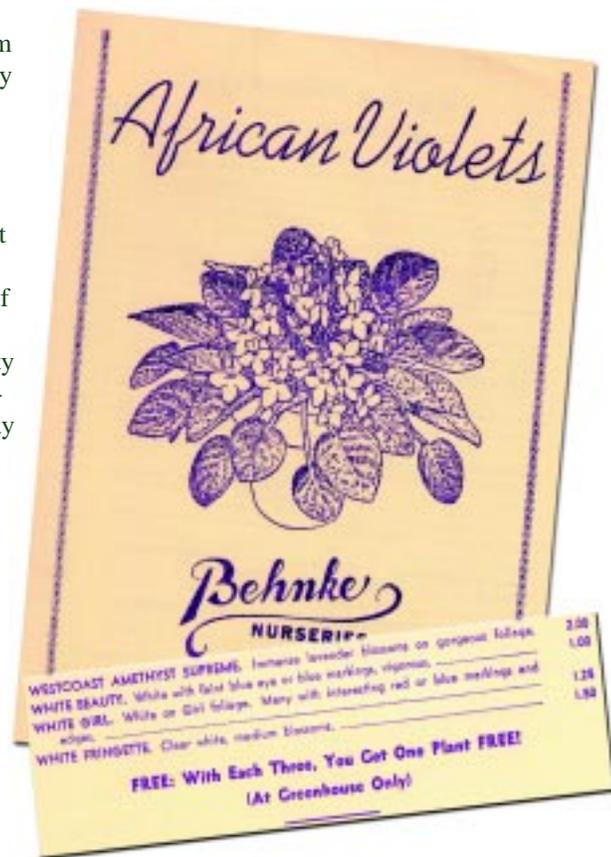
they also had many other plants to raise and sell, such as pansies, annuals, perennials and of course roses, to mention a few. At the same time they thought: "Why not? Let's develop our own varieties- *we* can do this!" So...they started cross-pollinating plants, kept records and developed some of the most popular varieties—such as 'Behnke Boy', 'My Maryland', 'All Aglow', 'Washington Star', 'Sonja' and 'Fantasy'. 'Fantasy' was one of the first speckled varieties—a pale single lavender with dark speckles on the petals.

Mom was the one that was instrumental in doing the tedious crossing and record keeping. When the new "babies" (plantlets) bloomed, only those that had any potential were set aside for more work. The best would be named and registered with the African Violet Society. Those not selected were sold as seedlings in 2" clay pots— .35 cents each or three for a dollar.

Many African Violet clubs were started in the late '40s and early '50s and mom would give talks to them on the latest care and culture. She wrote articles not only for local papers but also for a national magazine. Dad developed potting soil for them, which we sold as "Afra Soil" because our customers wanted the same soil. This was packaged up in 5 and 10 pound bags—I know my brothers remember bagging it. Dad kept changing his soil mix—always striving for better and better.

There is so much more to this little story. I am sure Roland, William and Albert could recall all of the trials and tribulations of Behnke Nurseries and the African violets. We no longer grow and develop new varieties. Luckily, with the advent of the "bigger and better" commercial violets on the market—grown all over the world—new and unusual varieties are readily available. The African Violet Society still publishes their magazine where you can find what is going on in the wonderful world of *Saintpaulia ionantha* and its relatives (website avsa.org). To this day no other blooming houseplant has taken its place. The sheer number of varieties, flower colors and leaf selections, and ease of growing them in the home has not been surpassed. Yes, orchids are right up there —Mom raised them too—but *that's* a story for another day. □

Take a page from history! *The African Violet Catalog, circa 1950 (pictured at right), listed the many varieties of African violets available to Behnke customers. Although prices have skyrocketed in the ensuing years, a Behnke African violet, at just \$3.99, is still a lot of beauty for your buck. During the month of January, 2004, we invite you to take advantage of the same deal we offered customers more than 50 years ago — buy three, get the fourth one free! Simply present this page to the cashier to receive your free African violet.*



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**2004 Workshops & Free
Gardening Seminars! See Insert**

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