



Captivating Cape Primroses

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If I could only have one species of houseplant, I would pick the Cape Primrose, or Streps, as they are sometimes called. These are sometimes also referred to by their full scientific name, *Streptocarpus*, and are usually hybrids of a few different species. Interestingly, these plants are related to the familiar African Violet. Although the care is similar, I find them to be a lot more forgiving. The best part is that they bloom profusely in the home. The trumpet-shaped flowers come in just about every color you can think of, as well as bicolors. Some of my favorites have one color on the outside of the flower, and different colors on the inside. Flower petals may also be ruffled, and some even have splashes of other colors on the flower, making it look like someone threw paint on them. They do not need a lot of sunlight light so a bright window or table lamp will provide them with all that they need. They thrive under fluorescent and/or LED lighting. This allows the grower to have a large collection of them.



Note the elongated, trumpet-shaped flowers on this Streptocarpus 'Strawberry Ice' (photo by M. Lisy).

The only downside to Streps is that they do not like hot weather. They generally stop blooming during this time, and frequently need water. But this disadvantage is also their advantage. They actually prefer cool, moist areas. In the summer, I like to put mine outside underneath a big mature tree where they thrive in the shade. Don't forget to water them frequently in the warmer weather. They generally bloom profusely in this setting.

Over the winter, when just about everything else outside is dormant, and even our regular houseplants are in resting mode waiting patiently for spring, these Cape Primroses are thriving. A cool, moist basement is their ideal growing condition, provided you give them some artificial light. Mine seem to be very happy and continue to bloom throughout the winter. They do occasionally take some short breaks between large blooming events at various times of the year, but these are not too frequent.



A stunning two-toned Cape Primrose called 'Deep Blue Vein' (photo by M. Lisy).

As stated above, they are related to African Violets, and have similar cultural requirements. The planting medium should have some extra perlite added to it to improve drainage. Soggy soil is the way to kill either of these plant species. Do not let the pot sit in the water that collects in the saucer for more than a half hour or so. Let the plants dry between waterings. Streps will actually start to wilt if they get too dry but perk up with prompt watering. Do not let this happen repeatedly as this can be a terrible stress on the plant and may reduce blooming. I like to fertilize each time I water with an African Violet fertilizer per package directions.

One of the greatest joys of plant keeping is propagating them. Cape Primroses are rather easy to propagate. Simply take one of their elongated leaves and cut it into pieces. Dip one end into some rooting hormone (I prefer the powder type). Plant this shallowly in the same type of potting medium used for the adult plants. Water well, and place a small plastic bag upside down over the plant/pot to keep the humidity high, as the plant does not have any roots to absorb water yet. Keep the cutting watered, but not soggy. In no time, you will see new plantlets sprouting from the surface. I find these new plants to be extremely hardy. Pot up when the plant looks too big for the pot, but be careful not to rush this part. A good indicator of the need for repotting is when the plant needs to be watered more than once a week.

When looking for some plants to brighten up the dull winter days, check out the many species of Streptocarpus that are available. Their perky blooms and easy care will liven up your home year round. For information about growing Streptocarpus or if you have any other gardening questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.