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Saintpaulia ionantha

[Synonyms : *Saintpaulia kewensis*]

AFRICAN VIOLET is an evergreen perennial. Native to tropical East Africa (particularly coastal Tanzania) it has small violet flowers.

It is also known as *Senpólia fialová* (Slovak), *Usambara-Veilchen* (German), Usambara violet, and *Usumbarská fialka* (Czech).

There are now many cultivated varieties in different colours.

Ionantha is derived from Greek *io-* (violet) and *-antha* (flowered) components meaning ‘with violet flowers’.

There is more than one story on how the African violet was discovered. One describes how the German Governor of Tanganyika (now Tanzania), Baron Walter Le Tanneaux von Saint Paul-Illaire (1860-1910), was touring the region he controlled in 1892 and is said to have come across the African violet in the Usambara Mountains. He sent seeds of it (and seedlings) home to his father in Germany who he knew had long been a patron of the botanic garden at Hanover. It was under the directorship of Hermann A. Wendland (1825-1903) and he identified the plant as a new genus. Another describes how in the 1890s nuns working near the Usambara mountains came across these flowers in nearby forest and when they returned home to Germany took some of the plants with them. These two instances could, perhaps, be connected. In Germany it seems this new species/genus did not receive a rapturous welcome because, authorities suspect, the plants were not found easy to grow. Eventually however some of them reached North America and a reputed orchid grower in southern California promoted them with considerable success as an ornamental plant.