

Nursery Blooms

BY CAS MIDDLEMIS



Saintpaulia X 'Winter's Dream'

In 1894, just two years after the first European discovery in Tanzania of the African violet, *Saintpaulia ionantha*, C.F. Newman & Sons in Adelaide were selling the seed. This highly entrepreneurial nursery was a front runner in the marketing of what is now one of the world's most popular houseplants. The story is all the more remarkable when it is recognised that this plant was unavailable in the United States until the mid-1920s.

The African violet was discovered in 1892 by Baron Walter von Saint Paul in the Usambara Mountains, Tanzania. He collected seed from the plants, which he sent home to his father in Germany. Seed was also given to Hermann Wendland of the Royal Botanical Gardens in Hanover, Germany. The plant's generic name, *Saintpaulia*, was taken from the man who discovered it.¹

C. F. Newman & Sons' nursery was established in 1875 at Water Gully, in Tea Tree Gully, Adelaide.² By the time their *General*

Descriptive Catalogue was published in Adelaide in 1894, the nursery was a thriving concern. This 200 page catalogue provided an extensive choice to the gardeners of South Australia. Under the heading 'Novelties in Flower and Seeds'

Saintpaulia ionantha appears with the following description:

It was discovered on the Usambara Mountains in Central Africa. The leaves, which are dark green, of fleshy consistence and downy surface, spread themselves laterally just over the soil and form as it were a rosette,

*in the centre of which spring up quite a bouquet of flowers, violet-like both in colour and shape, as the name implies, but 1 1/2 in. in diameter, and gracefully borne on stalks 2 inch to 3 inch high. Not only is the Saintpaulia very free flowering, but it commences blooming within five to six months from time of sowing. As soon as the leafy rosette is formed, the flowers commence to spring up and continue to do so almost uninterruptedly, affording a rich display of flowers. As this remarkable new plant belongs to the order of Gesneriaceae the seed is extremely fine and requires similar treatment to that of the *Streptocarpus*. It is also readily propagated by division of leaves, but does not form a bulb, the roots being of the fibrous character. Per packet, 2/6.³*

Charles Newman, whose original surname was Neumann,⁴ was eleven years old when he emigrated to Australia from Germany with his family in 1846. Having left Germany so young his contacts in the nursery trade would have been established from Australia. The catalogue is the only proof that the African violet seeds were in Adelaide two years after the plant's discovery in Tanzania. Today there is no knowledge of what became of the early nursery records, which could have provided information of local and overseas seed sources. However Newman's catalogue did advertise, 'choice German seeds imported from the best German growers',⁵ showing he had established good seed suppliers.

Although Hermann Wendland of the Royal Botanical Gardens in Hanover had the African Violet seed, it was the Friedrich Benary Seed Company in Erfurt, Germany that sold the first commercially produced plants and seed in 1893.⁶



Saintpaulia X 'Balle Eva'

Friedrich Benary created his plant breeding company in 1843. It is still operating and is managed by the same family today, and known as Ernst Benary Samenzucht GmbH.⁷ One of the current managing directors, Ernst Benary, explained that although the company did have some early records dating back to the 1890s, many were destroyed during World War II. The information that did remain dating back to this time was the name of the contact person or company, not the seeds ordered.⁸

Interestingly his firm's records did reveal some contact with several Australian companies in the late 1800s. Although none were in Adelaide there was a reference to C.F. Newman & Son in Perth. This was a branch of the Adelaide business, set up in Western Australia by the eldest son, Charles Newman. It was located at 110 Barrack Street, Perth in 1897.⁹

The Benary records show contact with the Perth branch of the nursery occurred sometime between 1890 and 1911. This is a little vague as the records listed "C.F. Newman & Son, Perth, before 1911" with an additional handwritten notice: 1890. Ernst Benary commented that "we expect that it could mean that the contact was from 1890 until 1911, but we do not have any proof for it".¹⁰ As Friedrich Benary was the only seed company at that time offering *Saintpaulia*, the seeds in Adelaide had to have come from Benary or directly from Hermann Wendland of the Royal Botanical Gardens in Hanover. "As far as I know," Ernst Benary said, "Wendland did not produce seed of *Saintpaulia* to sell. We got some plants from him to work on. So it is very likely that the seeds came from us."¹¹

Although there is no available documentary evidence of how *Saintpaulia ionantha* seed entered Australia, the sale of the seed through the Newman's catalogue in 1894 shows that it was in Adelaide only two years after its discovery in Tanzania. Ernst Benary confirms that there was contact with C.F. Newman & Son in Perth. This contact could have been established initially through the Adelaide based company.

It is fascinating to consider the short time-scale between the discovery in Tanzania and the marketing within Australia of African Violet

seed. Friedrich Benary offered the seed of the first commercially produced plants for sale in Germany in 1893. Newman's catalogue was published within the next year. When taking into account transportation to Australia, along with the germination and flowering of the plants, then this industry was particularly dynamic in the late 1800s, especially if the catalogue description of *Saintpaulia* in bloom was from Newman's own observations and not provided by the seed company.

At this time a few enterprising nurserymen were at the cutting edge of their trade, enabling the gardeners of Australia to seize the opportunity to purchase plants which were rare within Europe, and unavailable in America.

Cas Middlemis is a researcher in the field of garden history. She recently completed a report into the first Experimental Plantation set up in South Australia by the late Noel Lothian and is currently working on a social history project with Peter Cuffley.

Endnotes

- ¹ *History of the African Violet* [on-line]. Available WWW: <http://www.yenra.com/african-violet/>
- ² Auhl, I. (1978). *From settlement to city: a history of the district of Tea Tree Gully 1836-1976*. Blackwood: Lynton Publications Pty. Ltd. p.296.
- ³ *C.F. Newman and Son's general descriptive catalogue (1894-5)*. Adelaide: Vardon and Pritchard. p.10
- ⁴ Neumann anglicised his name in the 1850s. Auhl, I. (1978). *From settlement to city: a history of the district of Tea Tree Gully 1836-1976*. Blackwood: Lynton Publications Pty. Ltd. p.295.
- ⁵ *C.F. Newman and Son's general descriptive catalogue (1894-5)*. Adelaide: Vardon and Pritchard. p.59
- ⁶ *History of the African Violet* [on-line]. Available WWW: <http://www.yenra.com/african-violet/>
- ⁷ *Benary* [on-line] Available WWW: <http://www.benary.com/>
- ⁸ Email: Ernst Benary to Cas Middlemis [4 October 2004]
- ⁹ [G. F. Winton's Town and Country Directory of Western Australia 1897-1898 Perth: C.F. Winton, p.418]
- ¹⁰ Email: Ernst Benary to Cas Middlemis [4 October 2004]
- ¹¹ Email: Ernst Benary to Cas Middlemis [4 October 2004]



Saintpaulia X 'Rhapsodie Venus'