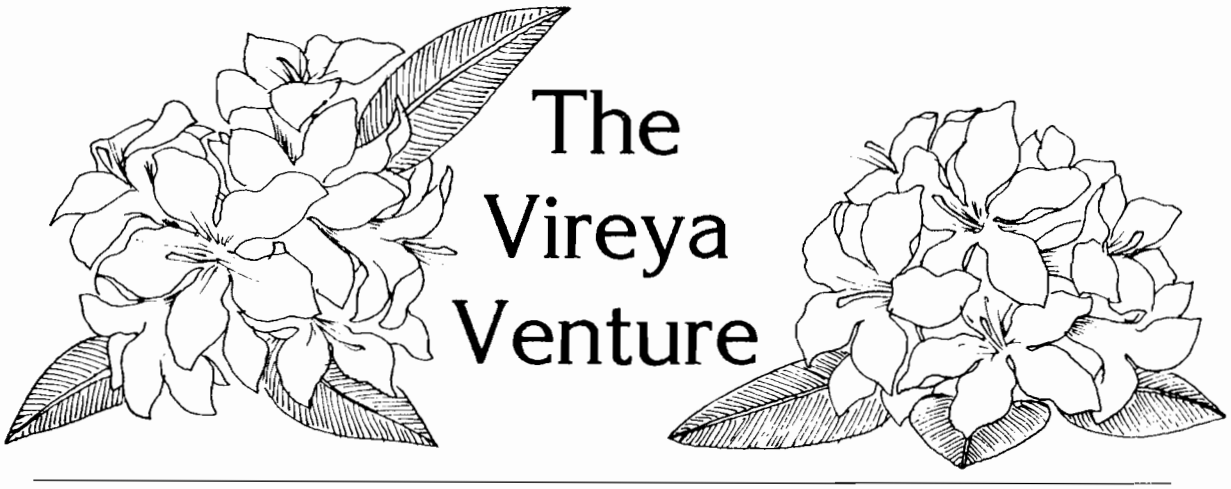

THE VIREYA VENTURE No.26 JANUARY 1997

Last year at this time I wrote of the erratic weather,the good growth of everything in the garden, and the magnificence of the trusses from Rh.leucogigas x Rh.zoelleri. This year the same comments apply as they did last spring. Very heavy pruning of all plants has been essential, the shredder has been worked hard and another compost bin has been added. And...a welcome gift of lucerne hay was also shredded and composted...more about that next issue.

Some overseas news from Mrs Barbara Campbell and Mr.Mitchell is included later, they attended the 1988 Bi-Centennial Internation Rhododendron Conference here and send good wishes to us.
Mr.Paget's account of his Borneo adventure will make you feel a little jealous no doubt, but if we can't get there at least we can grow some of their vireyas - it was good to be told that Lyn Craven had flowered Rh.polyanthemum and Rh.himantodes, and to see Dr.John Rouse's photo of Rh.ericoides - all of these from Borneo.

Your letters are necessary for the future of this newsletter - perhaps for a start try the suggestion,later, of a list of 'Good Doers' in your garden, it would be interesting to see how much the effect of climate has. 'Good Doers' do not necessarily mean the biggest flowers, just the ones that flower most consistently and are the least likely to have troubles.

Send them to: The Editor, P.O.Box 8, Keiraville 2500, N.S.W.
J.Clyde Smith.

MT. KINABALU

From Barry Paget,1422 New Cleveland Road, Capabala West, Q.4157

"I had the immense pleasure of visiting Borneo during Sept/Oct. last year. This was a wonderful experience. To me it was almost a horticultural pilgrimage, having been involved with plants for most of my life.

I climbed Mt.Kinabalu to an elevation of 12,500 ft.(3,810metres) and saw a magnificent array of vireyas above the elevation of 5,000 ft (1524 m.). Mt.Kinabalu is very interesting as there is a diverse range of vegetations from sea level to the summit.

Fortunately we were able to drive to the rest house at 5,000ft. where we stayed overnight in comfortable accommodation at the National Park Headquarters. There is an interesting Botanic Garden at this location. At this elevation we saw some of the richest oak forests in the world. We departed early next morning for the Laban Rata resthouse at 11,000 ft. The climb was very steep in places although there is a good wide path all the way with occasional rest stops where shelter, mountain fresh water and toilets are provided. This journey took over six hours and a good level of fitness is necessary for the climb.

Above 6,000 ft (1829m) we observed Rh.stenophyllum (the slender leaf rhododendron) and Rh.crassifolium with its very sprawling habit of growth. The moss or cloud forest starts at 7,000 ft (2,134m) and here grows Rh.fallacinum (the copper leaved rhododendron) with its orange flowers and golden-copper foliage. Also at this elevation a range of magnificent pitcher plants (Nepenthes lowii) occurs. One plant of Rh.praetervisum was also obseved with its long tubular red blooms.

Around 8,000 ft (2,591m) the bamboo forest appears. At this elevation the magnificent Rh.lowii with its massive 300mm heads of yellow gold to apricot blooms and Rh.retivenium (golden rhododendron) occur.

Around 9,500 (2,896m) the bamboo forest gives way to a very windswept Leptospermum recurvum forest where soil is quite yellow -orange containing high levels of toxic chromium and nickel. The trees are very gnarled and twisted. The large mossy pitcher plant (Nepenthes villosa) with pitchers up to 250mm long is found at this elevation as is Rh.ericoides (heath rhododendron) with its small red tubular blooms which is only found growing on Kinabalu.

Rh.buxifolium (the box leaved rhododendron) was observed as was Rh.rugosum (the rough leaved rhododendron) with its distinctive pink-purple flowers. These appeared at an elevation of 11,000 ft (3,353m). Above 12,500 ft (3810m) the tree line disappears and solid granite rock faces make up the terrain to the summit.

Could'nt climb any higher than this due to oxygen starvation. Dawn at this elevation was breathtaking. The final assault on the summit usually starts around 2.30 am though one must start

the return trip to Laban Rata by 9am as the clouds start to roll in about that time. To become lost on Kinabalu would be a horrifying thought.

The trip was the most memorable of my life. I organised it through Intrepid in Melbourne. We had our own guide all the way who was one of the local tribes people (Dusan), with a good knowledge of English and an excellent knowledge of the local vegetation. It was very interesting to observe a number of vireyas growing epiphytically in prolific moss. I was a little frustrated to find that no one could tell me the best season to see the bulk of vireyas blooming on the mountain. I know these are poisonous. How is it so many of the blooms observed were chewed seriously by insects?

For my next trip I would want to spend more time at lower elevations where a number of other vireya species occur as well as other mountains. Having spent three and a half weeks on the trip I saw much of what I wanted. Next time I will have a better idea of where I want to travel to see an even wider range of vireya species.

Throughout the trip many orchids and other plants were also observed. With a thirty-five year history of orchid growing these have a special appeal."

xxxxx

This will bring back to some of us, the pleasures of our P.N.G. visits, and in particular the effectof even 10,000 ft altitude on the effort needed to climb a steep hill!

The Borneo vireyas number some 50 species and Mt.Kinabalu has 25 of them growing on its slopes. They are all beautifully illustrated in full colour in the booklet 'Rhododendrons of Sabah'. This was available from the Edinburgh Botanic Garden when first released and perhaps still is.

In regard to the toxicity of rhododendrons in general,this varies from non-toxic to extremely poisonous, and the effect varies with the animal,particularly in regard to foliage. The pounded pulp of leaves has been used to catch fish that are stunned by it.

The clasic example of the toxicity of the nectar of some rhodo-dendrons (which contains the poison acetylandromedol) was the honey made from the azalea Rh.luteum in Turkey, which laid low for several days an army of Greeks passing by, who had feasted on it, in 401 B.C. None died but others have since and vireya nectar can be very dangerous. One can easily lick a little nectar off a finger after an accidental contact - so, be careful!

Most bees are not affected and it seems that many other different classes of pollinators (as recorded in New Guinea) such as birds, bats and moths are also unaffected.

xxxxx

DISPLAY GARDENS

Our July issue (No.24) had a letter from Mr.N.Puddey of Woolgoolga regarding the possibility of growing Vireyas in the Coffs Harbour Botanic Garden.

The desirability of assisting the establishment of such display gardens in Northern areas was discussed by the National Council of the Australian Rhododendron Society in April 1996 and again in more detail at the October meeting in Adelaide, when a small committee was appointed to advise on any proposals.

As a member of that Committee I wrote to Mr.Puddey offering some specific assistance to the Friends of the Botanic Garden at Coffs Harbour if he would approach them on our behalf. His reply was a very pleasant surprise and I quote the relevant sections of his letter:-

"The Friends of the Coffs Harbour Garden have twice,since I wrote to you, invited me along to their meetings to display and talk on Vireya. These talks also stimulated enthusiasm for they asked me to assist in the development of a Vireya Display Garden. I supplied the plants at wholesale price and have offered as my contribution to the Garden, to replace losses and to periodically provide advice and maintenance when/if required.

The bed is made up of mostly hybrids and a few species (the bulk of these came from Graham and Wendy Snell originally).
These include:-

R.loranthiflorum
R.jasminiflorum
R.lochiae
R.notiale
Gardenia Odyssey
Jean Baptiste
Dresden Doll
Moonwood
Sunset Fantasy
Haloed Gold
Shantung Rose
Pink Pazazz
Wattlebird
Iced Primrose
Guenevere
Shantung Pink
Simbu Sunset
Bold Janus
Fireplum
Sweet Amanda
Craig Faragher
Just Peachy
Ravalac
Eastern Zanzibar
Elegant Bouquet
Anatta Gold
Toff
Princess Alexandra
Charming Valentino
Bob's Crowning Glory
Arthur's Choice
Highland Fair
Highland White Jade
Magic Flute
Alisa Nicole
Rosie Posie
Lochmin
Pennywhistle
Little Pinkie
Calavar
Little Grace

This display is tiered, having the larger forms at the back down to some smaller types and miniatures along the front. I've tried to provide a cross section of what is available. Which hybrids and species have I missed that should be included?

The Friends and I certainly appreciate what you have done and

will value your input and the support of the Australian Rhododendron Society, and thank you for your support and the book for the Friends Library."

Such Vireya gardens that we know - Olinda, the Illawarra Park. the Botanic Gardens of Sydney, Wollongong, Melbourne and Adelaide are a very good way to show the public what Vireyas are and how they may be grown in differing circumstances.

xxxxx

COMMENTS OF INTEREST

The most recent issue of the American Rhododendron Society had three items that are applicable here:-

1. There will be a Vireya meeting in Hawaii on Jan.29th - Feb.2nd in conjunction with the Californian Chapter of their Society. Advance notice had been given to me by Mrs Barbara Campbell of 527 Ashbury Avenue, El Cerrito, CA 94530 U.S.A. but by accident this was omitted from the last issue. She also advises that anyone coming to the San Francisco area could contact her on phone or fax 510-524-8143 for assistance in viewing local Vireya gardens.

Mitch Miller's garden at Volcano on the main island, Hawaii, will be one centre of attraction for the Conference, she says,- "when he trims (Vireyas) he sticks the cut pieces in the ground and they grow".
While Hawaii is in the tropics- about 20°N.- Volcano is at an altitude of nearly 4,000 feet, which could make it an ideal climate.
For more details of the meeting, contact E.White Smith, Vireya Vine Editor, 4317 N.18th Tacoma, WA 98406, phone 206-752-1625 or Mitch Mitchell at 808-967-7209, Hawaii.

2. Nearer home the New Zealand Rhododendron Association will be holding their 1997 Conference 24th-27th October. This is a good time to visit there and there will be more details in the next issue.

3. The Am.Rh.Scty's recent membership survey lists of rhododendron 'Good Doers' is detailed for each of their districts. But although Southern California lists Vireyas there were too few reports to be included.

This would be an interesting exercise here - e.g. an article in the R.H.S. Rhododendron and Camellia Yearbook of 1969 was written by the late Arthur Headlam which effectively listed some 'Good Doers' during a heatwave in Melbourne. These were R.laetum, R.christianae, R.konorii, R.javanicum, R.gracilentum and hybrids R.macgregoriae x R.lochiae, and R.lochiae x R.christianae. No doubt there would be others today, depending perhaps on the season and availability.

My choice, at the moment, would be R.Javanicum, R.Jasminiflorum, and Triumphans, Pendragon, Littlest Angel, Golden Charm, and for a basket, St.Valentine x R.lochiae.

Other favourites R.laetum, and Penrose are omitted because of a weakness for powdery mildew, although both flower well and grow vigorously - but there are a dozen or so that might well be named. And they do not produce the magnificent and giant trusses of R.leucogigas x R.aurigeranum, or R.leucogigas (H.S.) x R.zoelleri, which are not always the best plants.

What are your choices? Others would like to know what you would keep if you had to through out all but half a dozen of your Vireyas.

xxxxx

4. A most interesting suggestion from the Camellia News of December 96:- T.E.Pierson of the St.George and Sutherland Branch has experimented with the grafting of Camellias in the normal fahion - a cleft graft - but not onto the usual stock but onto pieces of camellia roots of sufficient thickness and 20 - 25cm long.

There are advantages in this method inasmuch as the understock, for camellias at least, is always available, and the grafted plant can be planted to root depth, giving greater ease of handling. Roots may be taken from any old plants without harm, and for Vireyas, possibly when repotting old pot bound plants. The practice is an old one in Japan, particularly for Bonsai.

Litle has been recorded on grafting Vireyas, maybe some of our more difficult species, taken out of their preferred habitat, would do better on other rootstock.

xxxxx

Also from Barry Paget:-

I have also discovered two new formulae for Osmocote Plus released by Scotts. These are high potassium, lower nitrogen formulations which should promote good flowering of vireyas. I was aware that vireyas like extra potassium and this new formula means I do not have to provide the slow release potassium separately.

The formulae are as follows:

(5-6 month) N:10 P:4.8 K:15 Mg:1.2 + trace elements
(8-9 month) N:9 P:4.8 K:15 Mg:1.2 + trace elements

These formulae should be excellent blossom boosters.

I have had an excellent year flower wise with most plants blooming profusely. One exceptional hybrid is 'Lochmin' which I grow in hanging baskets and these have produced thousands of blooms per plant and make a wonderful show

xxxxx