THE VIREYA VENTURE APRIL 1999 No.35

At this time last year the comment on the weather was that it was hot and dry. This summer seemed even hotter although temperatures were not excessive - 27°to 30°C were constant but the very high humidity was the greatest discomfort factor - working in the sun on a calm day was not for the timid.

But we did have some rain, in all a total of 423mm, fairly well spread out and everything grew vigorously, lawns and weeds too. The biggest inflorescense again came from the leggy R.leucogigas x R.aurigeranum plant and the longest period in flower was from Triumphans in the ground. Jock's Cairn in a large pot also had a great show of flowers for a long period, in part shade.
Now the smaller flowering ones are showing up and Penrice is putting on its best show ever, no doubt helped by the recent removal of a large tree nearby, with more light and less root competition.

Some August stormwork repairs are still waiting on finance for completion whether from insurance or from grants, and future building work is being closely scrutinised to avoid possible future flooding. The City's proximity to the escarpment - for 60Km - exposes it to many small streams, just drains normally, but heavy rains may make them a flood hazard. And rainfall can be very variable along the coast - Easter Friday gave us 2mm of rain in central Wollongong while Sydney had 82mm with some suburbs having over 100mm.

The Editor, P.O.Box8, Keiraville N.S.W.2500.

J.Clyde Smith.

RHODODENDRON LORANTHIFLORUM 'SRI CHINMOY'

There is a most interesting article in the Journal of the American Rhododendron Society for Winter 1999 on the above Vireya written by Dr.John Rouse and Leslie Bursill of the University of Melbourne, who have sent me a copy.

This plant was given to Dr.Rouse in 1970 by Lyn Craven of Canberra, as a cutting from seed he collected in 1964 on Bougaineville and gave to members of the Australian Rhododendron Society. It was registered in 1997 as 'Sri Chinmoy' after reaching a height of 2.4m. Dr.H.Sleumer's 'Flora Malesiana' describes Loranthifolium as having 4-5 flowered umbels but 'Sri Chinmoy' typically has inflorescences containing 8 or9 flowers, and this is its distinguishing feature.

Sri Chinmoy is an Indian living in New York who is renowned for his efforts to show others how to find fulfillment, happiness and peace in their lives through meditation. There are 'Sri Chinmoy Peach Blossom Sites' in many places around the world, hopefully to assist in producing and maintaining world peace.

The article is a long and detailed account of this and other Vireyas with illustrations and much good advice on growing and maintaining them. It concludes with the note that in due course rooted cuttings will be available from Geraldine Roelink, Vireya Valley Nursery, Woori Yallock Road RSD, Cockatoo Victoria 3781.

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The late John Womersley while engaged at the Bougaineville Copper Mine saw R.loranthiflorum growing nearby and commented on the fact that it was growing quite happily in soil with a copper content far higher than he thought possible.

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From Brian Clancy, 31 Renown Street,Bentleigh,Victoria 3204.
"Further to my report on the flowering of R.rarilepidotum in VV No.34 Jan 1999, the demand for seed of this species greatly exceeded my expectations resulting in the contents of 40 seed capsules being sent overseas.
Both plants of R.rarilepidotum bloomed from Sept.98 through to Jan 1999. I Jan.the two siblings were again carefully crossed to produce more high grade seed of this top shelf species. This seed should ripen by the end of April.....(Brian was going to make it available to VV readers but it ripened much earlier than expected and this could not be done - Editor)
28 trusses of Vireyas, a showy formal arrangement featuring Vireyas and six Vireya plants in flower were staged at the Vic, Rhodo.Branch at Nunawading on 19th Feb 99, apart from a large number of Azalea flowers and plants. Best of the night, by popular vote of more than fifty members present, went to the spectacular hybrid "King Solomon". This exhibit had six large flowers, each 13cm across, deep rose pink petals with a yellow throat and yellow reverse. Second best was awarded to Ruth Funder's very showy floral arrangement which included 25 individual Vireya flowers. Third place went to the brilliant 'Sunset Ecstacy' - a hybrid of R.zoelleri Michael Black with the best R.aurigeranum of 22 flowers.

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From Paul de Jager, Box 13163 Cascades 3202 South Africa :

"I guess in Australia not many Vireya growers bother with seed as cuttings and plants are readily obtainable, so I don't know if many 'Venturers' would be interested to know about the 'low tech' method which I have developed for germinating Vireya seeds: I do all my sowing out of doors under shade cloth, in cooler weather (in Winter) I use a small electrically heated propagating tray to raise the minumum temperature, but in the warmer seasons I use no temperature control apparatus.

The most important element in my sowing technique is the medium which is finely ground fresh (i.e. un - composted) pine bark. I pass the bark through a sieve with holes at approx.5mm, then sieve off (and discard) the finer particles using a sieve with 2mm holes. I boil the bark with a little water for ten or so minutes, to get it wet and to sterilise it.

I sow in 10cm clay pots which are 3/4 filled with stone chips of approximately 3-7mm diameter. I place a 20mm layer of the damp bark on top of the stone chips and sow the seed on top. The pots are stood in trays of water which is kept 15-20mm deep. This allows the medium to absorb moisture by capillarity and it evaporates off the top; but I also mist the pots at least once a day with a fine 'Fog-it' nozzle on the hose. The pots are situated under shade cloth but they do get bright sunshine through this.

I find I get very good results by this method. I understand that pine bark contains chemicals which inhibit the development of fungi and bacteria, so reducing damping off of seedlings. I do not believe that these chemicals remain in bark which has been composted.

Once the seeds have germinated I remove the pots out of the water trays and put them on staging where air can circulate above and below them. They are watered by misting - as above - or by rain, and weak foliar feed is applied once weekly. Once the seedlings are big enough to handle easily I prick them out - about ten per pot - into similar pots but with the bark replaced by a mix of 2 parts of palm peat to 1 part of coarse river sand, with about one teaspoon of gypsum per litre.

No doubt this method is open to further experimentation with refinement but I can say with confidence that it works really well - if I've got good seed I'm pretty sure it will germinate and the seedlings will not damp off. Perhaps others will find it a useful method too!

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Mr de Jager would welcome any seed that you may have available, particularly R.leucogigas, R.intranervatum, and the Michael Black form (or any other) of R.zoelleri. He would send seed of their native plants in return.
They have had a very hot summer there, but unlike ours it has been very dry.

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RHODODENDRON SEARLEANUM

In the last issue of the VV (No.34,Jan 99) Mrs Sylvia Saperstein wrote of the growing on of a plant of R.searleanum for Mr Lou Searle. This is the only plant in Australia that we know of, it was sent from Edinburgh by Mr George Argent at Lou's request, 1½ years ago.
This aroused Brian Clancy's interest and he wrote to me with some facts of the history of this species.

I quote from his letter:-"R.searleanum is described by George Argent in The Rhododendron Handbook, R.H.S. 1998. A full copy of the description is attached. A brief summary is:
"A magnificent species, pale pink (extra large) trumpet shaped flowers, 11-16 per umbel, beautiful and powerfully scented."

The enormous contribution by Lou Searle of Vireyas to the Australian Rhododendron Society was delayed by the worst postal strike in Australian history,in 1974. Most of the plant material was held up at Tullamarine Airport for some 16 weeks. This delay resulted in extra fumigation with methyl bromide by the Quarantine Department.

From this material I propagated 570 plants with LS numbers in the Quarantine House at Olinda. After 12 months effort the plants were ready for quarantine inspection. I offered to turn these 570 plants into more than 2000 plants so that all members could participate. Then, without notice to myself, most of the 570 LS plants were removed to unknown destinations. Of the few remaining plants only six ended in the Society's glasshouse and three plants were left behind because they had lost their labels. I took these three 'orphans' home and one turned out to be LS37.

A magnificent photograph of R.konori LS37 was featured on the front cover of the American Rhododendron Society Quarterly Bulletin Vol 33 Fall 1979,No.4. I understand that this photo of LS37 is to be featured on the cover of the compendium of all Vireya articles published by the American Society. This work is being undertaken by E.White Smith, Editor of 'Vireya Vine. The republishing of the photograph of LS37 is a tribute to Lou Searle who was held in high regard by Dr.Herman Sleumer.
Brian Clancy.
The full copy of the R.H.S. description of R.searleanum concludes with:- "A magnificent species which is very poorly known in the wild but well known in cultivation since its original and only introduction by Mr.L.K.Searle in 1973."

Having known for many years of Mr.Searle's many unsuccessful attempts to obtain a plant the comment on its being 'well known in cultivation' was hard to believe so I wrote to Brian for some confirmation. His reply detailed the despatch from P.N.G. of LS39 to Dr.Sleumer, its naming and its description in Blumea, and then the despatch of plant material to Boskoop and Edinburgh. There is little doubt that other Botanic Gardens would later receive plant material too, and distribute it - but not in Australia.

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VIREYA INFORMATION

Mr Chris Callard, 26 Colwood Gardens, London SW19 2DT, England, now has a website on the internet which contains sections on the history,distribution and cultivation of Vireyas; together with notes on classification accompanied by a complete list of species; lists of places to see and buy Vireyas; a list of reference works and also the hybrid listings. Over 85 species are photographed and he is currently working on increasing the number of hybrids illustrated.

The address is: http://bigfoot.com/~vireya
or: http://website.lineone.net/~cjcallard

Mr Callard has sent me a copy of the list of Vireya hybrids taken from his website....unfortunately out of the 641 listed there are 88 for which he has been unable to trace parentage. A number of these are of Australian origin, some of which are known to be of Don Stanton's crosses whose origins were accidently lost following his death in 1970.

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A brief note from Dr R.Withers,23 Melissa St.Donvale Vic.3111
"R.emarginatum is growing very well, but has never flowered. There is a nice painting of R.madulidii by Everard Bennett reproduced on the front of George Argent's Christmas card. first flowered in the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh in 1997.

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Vireyas in Thailand - Burke's Backyard magazine for March has a photo of "the fabulous and colourful gardens at the Royal Doi Tung palace were planted with more than 30,000 azaleas and rhododendrons from the world's best grower - Australia. Thriving in the cool mountain air of Thailand's north, in time they will become one of the world's greatest flower displays."
Unfortunately there is no specific mention of the Vireyas that had probably not then arrived.

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Powdery mildew is still a problem here - it is quite selective and does not affect many Vireyas at all. Recently I came across a comment that has intrigued me,viz:-The May-July 1993 issue of the Australian Garden Journal had a detailed comment (teken from the 'Avant Gardener' New York) on the importance of silicon in plants, protecting them from diseases,environmental stress and mineral toxicities.... so fertiliser containing sodium or potassium silicate at 100ppm controlled powdery mildew on crops. Foliar sprays containing silicon compounds were also effective, and better growth and yields were obtained.
Would it help Vireyas? What fertilisers contain Silicon salts?

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Editor.