Vireya Venture

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The surprise of the year was the appearance of two magnificent trusses on a plant that was given to me many (17) years ago by Jack Wilson with a label that said "Unknown seedling from Kinabalu". I put this in a 120mm pot and left it in this until now. The plant is about 1 metre high with two stems, growing slowly but without trouble. Kinabalu is on the Northern tip of Borneo, about 5 deg north of the equator so maybe our hot weather was the cause of it's flowering. It was easily identified as R. *brookeanum*

J. Clyde Smith

Clyde's R. *brookeanum*

R . *javanicum* ssp *brookeanum* grows and flowers freely as a heated greenhouse plant in temperate regions, a form from Kinabalu named 'Mandarine' received a first class certificate of merit from the Royal Horticultural Society of Great Britain in 1970 (J. Roy. Hort. Soc. Lond. 95: 229 1970). What makes it especially attractive is that spectacular flowers are often produced in the gloom of winter. Various forms have been in cultivation for over one hundred years and the Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener included an orange form as early as 1873 in it's "Choice greenhouse Rhododendrons" (Vol 24 new series 180-181). This Rhododendron has been introduced in to the lowlands of West Malaysia and low altitude forms might become useful plants for tropical town gardens in moist, partially shaded situations. Indeed Mr Ricketts was growing this subspecies in his lowland garden in Kuching , Sarawak in the 1930s where it was reported to flower three to four times a year but at irregular intervals.

Rhododendrons of Sabah – *Argent Lamb Phillips Collenette* (1988)

Disease and Genes

The Vireyas have suffered a little from powdery mildew but this seems to be dependent on the plant's individual resistance rather than the growing conditions. An outstanding example was Jock's Cairn, which was badly affected. It is growing between two other large Vireyas (Javanicum* Lateum and Javanicum * Pink Delight) whose foliage is touching but which have been completely free from mildew. *J.Clyde Smith*

Have you experienced similar situations where one hybrid suffers disease while others of different parentage resist and remain free of symptoms? Tell your story, it really is easy just write a few notes and post or email them to Neil Puddey c/o P.O.Box 126 Woolgoolga 2456, puddey@bigpond.com

Subscriptions are due for 2003, so far just 11 contributors and 50 on the mailing list.

To continue this edition I thought it appropriate to share more of Clyde's knowledge and experiences with Vireya as he is' The Venture's' number one journalist. The following article has been reproduced from Volume 35 of 'The Rhododendron' – Official Journal of the Australian Rhododendron Society. Thanks Clyde. The article will be of particular interest to those relatively new to Vireya culture.

VIREYA RHODODENDRONS

J. Clyde Smith

This is a precis of a talk given to the Victorian Branch of the Australian Rhododendron Society at its meeting of 17 May, 1995, by the Author.

We grow Vireyas for their flowers, but other aspects should also be considered. Their flowers last well indoors and were used for bridal bouquets many years ago, also many Flower Shows have a section for floral art, but I have never seen Vireyas used for that purpose in New South Wales.

Vireyas flower frequently but there are always times when they have no flower - the plant is always in view, can it be of more interest than just a sparse, leggy bush?
In brief, are we getting the best plants that we can and are we making full use of them?

Looking at how they grow naturally and how some people grow them may be of interest. Firstly there is often some doubt whether they are epiphytes or not, and a review of their habits in Papua New Guinea brings Canon Crutwell's comment to mind. He wrote in the A.R.S. Journal '*The Rhododendron*' of December 1971, that " some species of rhododendrons are normally always terrestrial, like *R. christianae* while others are undecided and will adopt either habitat, like *R. zoelleri* and *R. konorii*, and yet a third group appear to be always epiphytic, like *R. wrightianum*".

Certainly in the wild they may be seen as seedlings in some very unlikely places where they will be very short lived, initially needing no more than a little lichen and moss to hold some moisture - and frequent showers to maintain it. They will grow on the rock faces of roadside cuttings, on fallen branches and on tall trees or on the ground in grassy areas where they must grow tall to reach the light in competition with the native grasses, sugar cane etc.. Once established on a tall tree they can develop into a very large plant, too big to remain erect and becoming pendant, with roots that can be thick and swollen and extending down the tree.

The above habitants are the norm but *R. commonae* also grows on low tussocks in Kain swamp, mixing with orchids, carnivorous plants and other herbs. When transplanted they grow happily in clayey ground, and their growth in the bog would seem no way to grow them in a garden - but while giving this talk I saw a Vireya growing in what could be thought a similar fashion. To be specific, it was growing in a piece of treefern trunk sitting in a dish of water, an uncommon sight in N.S.W., but not in Victoria

Looking through old slides of many interesting Vireyas in P.N.G. brought to light some species that might well be used to extend our range of hybrids. Some have been used already, sparsely, but not all of them have been registered as yet. Further hybrids of such species as *R. christii, maius, blackii, pleianthum, superbum,phaeochitum, rhodoleucum, intranervatum,* and *scabridibracteum*, for example, might all add some variety in leaf as well as flower. *R. saxifragoides* has a spectacular flower, standing singly above a carpet of leaves, but it would be very optimistic to hope that this form could be reproduced in a hybrid with a great deal more heat tolerance. This Vireya incidentally is one that has a tap root.

Heat tolerance is not necessarily the same as the tolerance to full sun. In P.N.G. they all will grow in full sun but do not have the tolerance of a warmer climate, and it is essential that they be acclimatised. As an illustration, in P.N.G. in 1986 with a New Zealand party, Peter Schick and I noticed that plants of *R. aurigeranum* that were growing in heavy shade in the shrubbery on the steep bank of a creek had broad leaves, while those at the edge of the trees in partial sun had leaves of medium width. One solitary plant in full sun some three metres out from the shade had narrower leaves. This was obviously a reaction to the amount of light that these plants were getting. A similar reaction has been described by Dr. Sleumer in his book '*An Account of Rhododendron In Malesia*', in regard to *R. beyerinckianum*

Exposure to full sun may certainly result in burnt leaves on a very hot day, but the two large Vireya plantings in full sun at the Rhododendron Park of the Illawarra Branch at Mt. Pleasant are fully acclimatised and do not burn. The first of these plantings had been raised under shade and took several years before they looked certain to survive. They are fully grown now and in good condition. The second bed of much younger plants. mentioned in the Branch News in '*The Rhododendron*' in 1994, is being developed as a Vireya hill, a research project that will be detailed in the Journal later. These plants have not suffered any sun burn. However they were raised by a local grower from cutting that were struck singly in 75mm. pots in an igloo under sprinklers, and

when fully rooted were placed out in the open under full sun, without damage. Possibly their parentage was a help, but the fact that the stock plants were growing in full sun was probably the main aid to success.

Looking at two other gardens north of Wollongong N.S.W.. last year, with a warmer climate was stimulating. It was a novelty to see Vireyas growing behind Elkhorns in a garden near Wauchope - and to see them flourishing in a bed of aged sawdust (from a local sawmill) about 24cm. deep, in an area surrounded by Pine trees and their roots. Cuttings were being struck successfully in a straight coarse sand, without mist, rooting hormones or bottom heat, just in a box under a sheet of glass. On trying that method myself, my record was a cutting of 'Sunny' with roots appearing above the sand - and plenty below the surface - in just four weeks.

This sand is a special from Frisco Quarry Sands of Skinners Shoot, near Byron Bay, and I was fortunate to be given some by Mrs. Saperstein of Mullumbimby, N.S.W., who also uses this sand with a little peat and perlite to lighten it, for cuttings. She demonstrated two interesting practices: one was to follow the old practice of pinching out any single new shoots, to encourage multiple branching. Well, sometimes this does not work for me, but now I know to feed at the same time, to add a little extra vigour that is necessary for multiple branching. In the warmer climate of Mullumbimby, 9-month *Osmocote* is preferred for the summer, and two other applications of the shorter period mixes, are used during the cooler months. The results were a very fine looking lot of bushy plants.

The other, less usual practice was demonstrated by a batch of very long legged plants being trained as standards.

Mrs. Saperstein has another new way of identifying heat tolerant Vireyas. This is simple - plants with smooth leaves are the more heat resistant, but where high altitude plants have been crossed with low altitude ones, and diffused enough to produce smooth leaves, these were also heat resistant in her experience.