The Vireya Venture

A Newsletter for People Interested in Vireya Rhododendrons, Distributed by Email

Issue No. 70 January 2010

Editorial

It probably has not escaped the notice of most of recipients of TVV that there has not been an issue of this newsletter since March last year. The lack of issues came about partly because of the lack of contributions to this newsletter and partly because of our being overly busy with work. We apologise for this situation and will make every effort to never let it happen again, even if we have to reduce the newsletter's length.

TVV can be a useful resource to Vireya enthusiasts because it contains many articles and letters that convey the wisdom of experienced collectors and the requests for assistance about many different situations that readers encounter. We have always found it fascinating to read old newsletter issues and imagine it is similarly of interest to others.

Over the years we have been asked many times if back-issues of TVV were available. Were we can we send copies of back-issues from the time we became Editors, that is, from Issue #55 in December 2004. We did not have digital copies of earlier issues that we could send – they were all distributed as printed copies sent by ordinary mail. If digital versions existed we do not have them.

We have decided to rectify this deficiency by scanning all back-issues and making them available on an archival website. So far we have scanned 20 issues, from the start of TVV with Issue #1 in 1990 up to 1995. It is not a difficult task to scan old newsletters but it does take quite a deal of time, so we are progressing as quickly as we can.

In order to get all back-issues up on a website we actually need hard copies of all previous issues. Although we have copies of most issues we are lacking copies of TVV Issue #4 (July 1991) and Issue #27 (April 1997). If any readers have these back-issues we would very much appreciate it if you could send us copies, either digitally attached to an email or as photocopies sent by snail mail.

The other thing we need to decide is were we will put these archival copies. Our first choice is as a link through the website of the Victorian Branch of the Australian Rhododendron Society. We will also provide links through the Viva Vireya newsletter of the Hawaii Chapter of the Amer. Rhodo. Soc.

We hope to have all back-issues scanned and available on a website by the time of the next issue of TVV. We will advise you of what that site will be in the next issue, scheduled for April 2010.

Please email us and tell us what you are doing with your vireyas or any other interesting items you have come across. Please include photos as these can make the stories more interesting for readers. Please send your emails/articles/letters to:

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Melbourne Victoria 3000 Australia
Ph: +61 (0)3 9639 4493 Email: *lithic01@bigpond.net.au*

This is the flower of R. leucogigas 'Hunsteins Secret' that was in flower in Andrew Rouse's glasshouse in May of 2009. Andrew said: "The plant, about 30 years old, was grown from a cutting from the original plant collected by Lyn Craven in the Hunstein Range, PNG. The plant has three trusses of flowers (from 5-9 flowers per truss), each flower about 15cm long and 10cm wide at the mouth, a truly amazing sight! Each morning the glasshouse is full of the sweet perfume produced overnight."

Request About Potting Mix

From Sherla Bertelmann, Hawaii, March 2009

Aloha Graham and Janet. Here's a topic that I would like to hear more of.

Every time I leave Hilo (on the east coast of the Big Island) for another island in the Hawaiian chain I am reminded again of just how perfect the conditions are in Hilo for growing vireyas. The reminder comes to me each time I depart because this *perfect condition* is not so on the other islands.

The first problem is that they have heavy, clay-rich soils on those islands. A few folk are successful with the heavy clay soils in their gardens but, most have to grow vireyas in pots, not in the ground.

This leads to the second problem - the coconut media we use is not available to them – I am not sure why it isn't available. After looking around quite a bit there was nothing I could find that I felt comfortable in using. I understand that in some other places, as advised by a friend in Thailand, they too have problems getting anything suitable. They even have to resort to breaking up pottery to get sufficient drainage.

So, here's my question. I would like to know how folks around the world grow their vireya in the ground? Do they just accept the local soil, do they alter it by adding material, and if so what do they use? Do they routinely use raised beds? Here in Hilo our garden beds are predominantly made up of volcanic cinder and it is readily available. Add compost and it seems to be perfect for growing vireyas.

I am also interested in what people are using as potting media for vireya. We cannot use peat here because with our heavy and frequent rainfall it keeps the mix too wet. We can use coconut chips and perlite, both are well draining. But, for mainlanders (continental USA) coconut does not work for them because it's too light in weight. Then there's commercial orchid potting mix, which is mostly pine bark, this is available in stores, but often feels too coarse. But what of those folks that grow vireyas in pots who don't have access to commercial mixes. What do they use? Mulch? Compost and rocks? Tree fern fibre?

Aloha Sherla

Editors:

Dear Sherla. Your questions relate to the article on potting mixes which appeared in TVV issue # 68 in October 2008. We too would like to know what other collectors are using and what they are doing to their garden soil.

Our general experience is that most people modify their local soil to better suit vireyas, such as adding abundant compost and/or pine bark. For plants in pots they make up their own private potting mix, commonly based on a commercial mix for rhodies and azaleas or for orchids, but then add materials to either open it up and make it more free-draining or make it less open and more water-retentive.

You are indeed fortunate to live where there is an abundant source of highly porous but heavy weight material – volcanic cinder, which also is chemically relatively stable. Other collectors have found local materials that have similar properties, such as the late J Clyde Smith (a previous Editor of TVV) who used burnt coal ash which is abundant throughout the coal mining district where he lived (Wollongong, SE Australia) and some have used scoria (another porous volcanic rock) or zeolites. The other highly porous materials that are commonly available are perlite, coconut chips and even pine bark, but as you say these suffer from being very light and therefore of limited value in soil mixes for pots where some weight is desired to help the pot remain upright in windy conditions.

Sherla, the reason you have abundant volcanic cinder on the Big Island is because the volcanoes that are the base of your island are very young. Volcanic cinder is ordinary basaltic lava which has come up through the throat of the volcano and 'decompressed' (ie. dissolved gasses have come out of solution, much like soda water when the pressure is released) so that many small bubbles formed in the molten lava. This cinder was then ejected from the volcano together with more solid volcanic lavas. It is the small bubbles that make the cinder porous, but the cinder pieces remain heavy because of the intrinsic weight of the lava.

The same volcanic cinders on other Hawaiian islands, which are also the tops of volcanoes, are considerably older and many have been changed by extended exposure and weathering to heavy clay soils. This heavy clay is what people on the other islands have to contend with, and in fact in any geological area where there are old volcanic rocks. Your volcanic cinder will also eventually weather and produce clay minerals, but this will take quite a few thousand years – too long for you to worry about.

So, lets hear back from other collectors - What are you using in your soil mixes and why?

Photo of R. wrightianum x R. Belisar that flowered in April 2009 for Jose Almandoz of Iturraran Botanical Garden, Basque Country, Northern Coastal Spain, from seed distributed by the ARS Vireya Seed Exchange. Jose is moderator for the Vireya Group on Yahoo (vireya@yahoogroups.com).

Self-Watering Trays for Vireya Seedlings

from David Ward, Liverpool, UK, March 2009.

Graham and Janet,

Many thanks for the copy of TVV newsletter, which I found very interesting. I have been growing vireyas in Liverpool, UK, for about 2 years and I thought there might be some interest in how I am growing on some seedlings that I obtained a little over a year ago from Hawaii. Vireyas are very difficult to find in the UK so I rely on material from Hawaii. I attach a photo of the plants on self watering trays that I use.

One of the main problems I have had with young cuttings is correct watering, especially when I am away for a few days. Early last Summer I decided to see if self watering would work. First I prepared a free draining mix of bark and perlite and then added some slow release fertiliser as recommended for rhododendrons in anticipation that the cuttings could be in the pots for up to a couple of years. The cuttings were then potted up into clay pots of a size which was slightly larger than the root ball.

A self watering mat was made using capillary matting supported in a tray about 2 inches deep – but the exact depth is not critical. Polystyrene blocks from old packaging were used as support for the matting. This material was used as it is OK when kept submerged in water.

It is necessary to find the right shape of polystyrene to support the mat. Ideally it will have a flat top but it should not be a solid piece as this will reduce the volume of water in the tray. Other supports could be improvised or possibly a self watering unit could be purchased. After placing the pots on the mat they were watered from the top and then again from the top at the next watering. Eventually watering from the top was virtually stopped – this timing is a matter of judgement. Now I rarely need to attend to them apart from flushing out every so often and topping up the tray with water.

The plants have now been on the matting for nearly a year. The photo shows there is growth of moss on the mat and up the sides of some of the pots. There is also some lime on the pots but this does not seem to causing a problem as mostly the plants seem OK. My experience is that some of them romp away while others seem much slower. I have not moved the pots once they were settled onto the matting. They are inside a conservatory with a min temp of 54° and max 80°F.

I plan to pot-on the larger plants and move them outside in the Summer onto self watering mats. I hope to be able to maintain them in this way. Where possible in future I aim to use clay pots with a wider base, possibly half pots to increase the surface area in contact with the matting. I grow them all in pots as here in Liverpool as we get sharp frosts and the plants have to come inside for protection. This year there have been some unusually cold nights.

Most of my plants are quite young but I do have some photos which I have attached for you. I look forward to seeing the next edition of TVV.

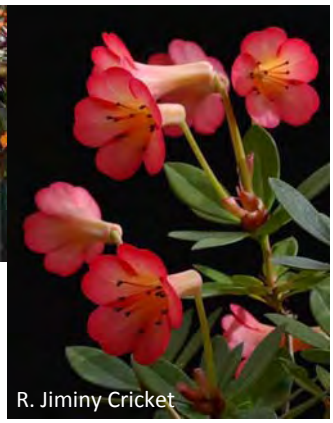
Best regards, David Ward

Editors: Here is a collation of some of David's photos:

R. javanicum (yellow form)

R. Kisses

R. Golden Charm



R. Jiminy Cricket

R. Just Peachy

R. Christo Ray

Dear David.
Yes, keeping small plants in pots sufficiently moist when you go away can be a difficult thing for a small collector and your self-watering mats are obviously a good option.

Do you know what the distribution of roots is in the pots? Water distribution throughout the mix in the pots will be fairly constant and presumably it ranges from '*continually moist*' at the bottom to almost '*constantly dry*' at the top where evaporation is happening, though there will also be some evaporation through the sides of the porous terracotta pots. Consequently the roots must have found positions in the mix at which they are comfortable to grow and get sufficient water. It may be that there are almost no roots in those areas of the mix that are too wet or too dry, and consequently the plants may be growing in a relatively small volume of mix. We may be completely wrong about this but it seems logical.

As a general rule one shouldn't change a system that is obviously working well. However, if you want to get faster growth and early flowing you might consider making slight changes, particularly if you anticipate a longish period when you won't be going away and can keep a close watch. You might get a greater root mass if you occasionally use a small amount of soluble fertilizer in the water and instead of just topping up the water in the trays that you pour the water onto the top of the mix and let it soak through to the trays. Of course, you will need to keep flushing the pots out occasionally so the fertilizer doesn't build up to a high concentration. When you take the plants outside for summer you will also need to keep a close watch on them as it is likely that the evaporation rate will be higher and they will receive infrequent but excess water from natural rainfall. Such changes in conditions could put stresses on the plants, but it may be worthwhile. David, please let us know how the transfer to outside goes?

Have any other readers had experience with this sort of self-watering system?

Showy Vireyas on a Veranda

from Harry Baird, July 2009

Dear Graham and Janet,

We live on the Sunshine Coast near Cooroy in Queensland, in a well drained sandy situation. We used to have lots of rhododendrons in Scotland where we came from and my father was a great expert in conifers, rhodies and rock plants.

Having previously had a small wholesale nursery (azaleas and camellias) and now retired, we looked at various shrubs to grow as a hobby and decided on vireyas as they seem reasonably easy to grow and flower for a good length of time. The vireyas are mostly grown in containers in our original nursery shade house which is very handy and we bring up the flowering plants to the veranda so we can enjoy them and they give us great pleasure. The photos here show why.

Top red: R. Rosie Posie; Right pink: R. Highland Arabesque; Lower: R. Just Peachy.

We do have some planted out in the garden amongst camellias and azaleas and they grow like mad!! We seem to get 2 growing periods per year here for most of them. We are trying to build up a collection but are finding it difficult to find people selling them. Some of our vireyas came from a nursery in northern NSW (no longer growing them) and the younger ones came from Neil Puddey at Woolgoolga on the NSW north coast. Do you know of anyone willing to sell young plants?

Photo of the group from the opposite side: Top right: R. Coral Seas; Middle Dark pink: R. Pink Delight; Top left pink: R. Highland Arabesque; Lower red-cream: R. Kisses.

We grow our potted vireyas in a mix of composted pine bark and sand with a little added dolomite (*calcium-magnesium carbonate*), gypsum (*hydrated magnesium sulphate*) and with some slow release fertilizer. They get sprayed against mite and I always add Natrakelp (an excellent local seaweed fertilizer) to the sprays to make it 'stick' on the leaves.

The one big snag we have sometimes is a large white grub approximately 3cm long, which eats the fine roots and therefore damages the root system. Eventually they will kill the plant. What does one use to kill these 'bugs'? We think they are the larvae of a large black beetle.

We hope your vireya plants are recovering from all their heat stress troubles. Happy gardening and best wishes; Harry Baird

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Editors:

Thanks for the email and photos Harry. Tightly packed arrays of flowering vireyas certainly make a wonderful display. Your veranda looks like a great place to display them.

You are probably correct that the white grubs are the lava of large beetles. There are similar beetles that eat grass roots. We imagine that there must be something that you can treat the soil with to kill these grubs.

Yes, vireyas certainly do grow well when planted in the ground in southern coastal Queensland. We feel they do better in the ground than in pots in many locations, including here in the south of Australia in Melbourne. We think that Neil Puddey is the best place to get young vireya plants. Keep collecting Harry.

Vireya from Flores, Indonesia

from Lyn Craven, Canberra, September 2009

Dear Graham and Janet,

A friend of mine, Frank Zich, recently spent some time in Flores, Indonesia. Flores is in the Lesser Sundas. The attached photographs are of *R. renschianum*, a subsection Euvireya species.

Frank found the species at one of the tourist spots although it is probably safe to say that most tourists would not know what an interesting plant they were walking by. *Rhododendron renschianum* has corollas about 30-40 mm long that in colour are much like those of *R. christi* from New Guinea, although the latter has quite a distinct gestalt due to the very hairy corolla and quite different foliage.

Frank provided the following notes: "The Rhodo was growing at ca. 1600m alt (close to 8deg 45min 55 sec S, 121deg 49min 16sec E - only taken off Google Earth) near the summit of Keli Mutu, a volcano in central Flores famous for it's three coloured crater lakes, near the town of Moni.

To find the Rhodos start walking from the carpark on the mountain where the track to the summit starts. The walk to the summit is relatively short and easy and is along a good path. Moni and Keli Mutu are easily accessible tourist attractions in Flores and most foreign tourists to Flores would visit this area, though tourism is still fairly light. When the track reaches a T-junction take the left track and follow it around to the summit lookouts. But, at this T-junction (straight ahead as you approach from the carpark) there are Rhodos on the low-shrubby slopes of the crater. After taking the track to the left and walking a few hundred metres there are more and taller (ca. 2m) plants to be found on the right side of the path in the shrub layer at the top of and along the sides of a roadside cutting (?south-facing slopes). All the plants I saw were terrestrial, many-branched shrubs. "

Editors:

Thanks for the article and photos Lyn. The bicolour flowers on *R. renschianum* are certainly attractive. Small plants of this species were available through the Victorian Branch of the ARS so we should see more and larger plants in coming years.

Unusual Growth Habit for a Vireya

by Graham Price, Melbourne, Australia

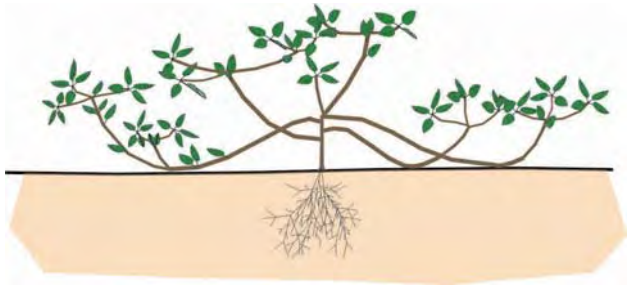
I recently discovered something that I though was unusual for vireyas and I decided to share it with you.

In previous issues of TVV I described a bed of vireyas I have that are all sister seedlings from one cross made in 1992, which was rather complex. The seed parent was : {(*R. phaeopeplum x R. zoelleri I.S.) x R. superbum*} and the pollen parent was: {(*R. laetum x R. aurigeranum) x R. zoelleris I.S.) F_2*}. Flowers of these plants are shown in the photos on the next page.

I put 140 of these seedlings in one garden bed so I could watch how they developed and compare better with poorer plants - a sort of experiment. About 70 of these plants are still alive (their conditions are not ideal) and they are flowering regularly. As expected there is a wide range of flower colours and quite different styles of plants.

In one spot I thought I had a dense patch of these seedlings all growing close together, as shown in the photo below. I could see several individual plants growing upright but also what appeared to be plants lying horizontally on the ground and turning up at the ends towards the light. I assumed these plants must have blown over. However, on closer examination I found that these 'horizontal plants' were actually individual branches leading out in different directions from just one plant growing in the middle of the patch.

In total there were 9 'horizontal branches' arising from a short but strong vertical trunk with a few extra branches coming directly upwards. Each 'horizontal branch' emerged from the trunk almost horizontally and tilted over until it touched the ground, then ran horizontally for 20-50cm, finally turning upwards at the end towards the light. Overall the width of this one plant was about 1.7m but its height was only about 0.7m. It is hard to see individual branches in the photo so I drew a sketch (shown below) in which I tried to show the basic structure of just a few branches.



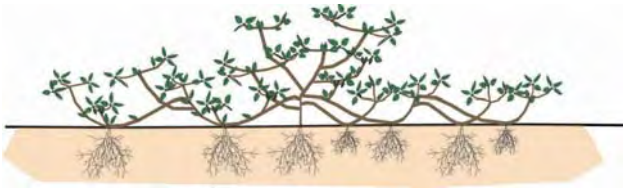
I have not before seen this arrangement of branches in vireyas. It appears to be a genuinely prostrate habit and not just a small low-to-the-ground but upright plant like most other vireyas that are called prostrate. I know there are a few genuinely ground-hugging vireyas from New Guinea that form mats only a few centimetres high, but these are quite different from a reasonably large shrub that has its branches arranged in a prostrate form. (Definition in Wikipedia: *A prostrate shrub is a woody plant, most of the branches of which lie upon or just under the ground, rather than being held erect as are the branches of most trees and shrubs.*)

I am somewhat ambivalent about this plant because its flowers are nothing special – an indistinct pink somewhere between the colours of the two parents. The leaves are OK, large and shinny green.

The cause of this growth habit seems obvious to me. The (*R. laetum x R. aurigeranum) x R. zoelleris I.S.*) F_2 pollen parent is a small shrub, ~50cm high, slightly soft and floppy with relatively long inter-nodal lengths and shortish light green rounded leaves. The seed parent is more upright and stiffer, ~2m high, with large, tawny brown to dark green leaves. The seedling appears to have inherited (and even exaggerated) the long inter-nodal length and softness of the pollen parent and the larger leaves of the seed parent. I suspect the early new-stem softness combined with the weight of the larger leaves has tended to pull the branches down until they rest on the ground and only the ends of branches have sufficient strength to rise to the sky.

I began to speculate what might happen if I allowed this plant to grow without any interference from me. I imagine that secondary and tertiary branches would emerge from the ends of the 'horizontal branches' and some of them would again grow long and tend to lay over until they rested on the ground. If this is repeated several times eventually this one plant would spread out horizontally and within a few years could reach 3-4m wide but only 1-2m high.

Also, I suspect that many branches will 'self-layer' and send roots into the soil so as to produce secondary growth centres. I tried to show what I mean in another sketch (shown below).



As I said, I have not seen this growth habit before in vireyas and am wondering if anyone else has seen anything like it? Maybe I should cross it with a similar plant with a better flower, back to one of the parents or even to self it and try to get a good prostrate vireya with a decent flower.

Graham Price

Move from Oregon USA to Adelaide, South Australia

December 2009

Vicki Morris (formerly Vicki Molina of Oregon) is interested in finding local vireya growers. She states:

"I am married to an Aussie now and living here in Adelaide. Yes, its very different from Oregon! Maybe I have some room to grow vireyas. Does anybody grown vireyas in the Adelaide area? Or know where I can get some plants/cuttings to start with? I have a lovely pond with my new house and I think I can make it work with some shade cloth. I am addicted after all.

I have been a member of the Aust. Rhodo Society for a few years. At present I am diving into books on Australian plants and learning as much as I can as quickly as I can with Autumn coming on so soon.

Propagating rhodies is nothing new to me and I'd be happy with cuttings. As a former international shipper I understand the rules and regulations about imports into Australia.

My email is vckmorris345@gmail.com and I'd love to hear from local vireya collectors.

Cheers, Vicki"

Editors:

We have already sent Vicki the name and contact number for the South Australian Branch of the Aust Rhodo. Soc. Another person you might contact Vicki is Mary Grant, who is part of the team involved in establishing vireyas in the Jewels of Asia exhibit with the two new Pandas at Adelaide Zoo, (Mary's contact address was sent to Vicki separately).

Two more flowers from plants grown by Jose Amandoz in Spain from seed distributed by the Amer Rhodo.Soc. Vireya Seed Exchange. Above: R. konori x R. lochiae; Below: R.zoelleri.

That is the end of Issue #70 of T V V. We hope that you enjoyed it. We will endeavour to get the next issue out promptly.

Graham and Janet Price

"It's goodnight again from Buster and YumYum. Its early evening and the temperature has dropped so we are taking Janet for a walk - only I do wish Yummy would stop pulling me everywhere. Cheers Buster"