# VIREYA VINE

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## An Article from the Summer 1981 issue of "Pacific Horticulture"

**Vireyas Return,**

By Margaret Adams, Portland, Oregon

Vireya rhododendrons are too lovely to lose. Native to mountainous jungles of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, they have a dark history and have been almost lost to plant lovers since World War 1. From the 1800s until recent times, the supply of Vireyas, also called Malaysians and Malesians, has been interrupted by war, theft, economic hard times and politics - not to mention the perils of collecting them where climate and terrain are inhospitable. But the dark ages for Vireyas may well be over.

*Rhododendron zoelleri*

Since 1960, botanists and plantsmen have collected, hybridized and grown some 300 species and their hybrids. Despite the disasters that have plagued even these recent propagation efforts, Vireyas are now available commercially as plants that home gardeners can enjoy.

Throughout the United States, plants are in the hands of competent propagators. As container plants that winter indoors on a sunny windowsill or as landscape plants in areas as mild as Southern California, Vireyas are horticultural jewels. They are well-suited to lowered thermostats in today's homes and the small spaces allocated for gardens in modern subdivisions.

Vireyas bring qualities found nowhere else in the genus Rhododendron. Golden yellows and vibrant oranges lend an array of brilliant colors - pure pinks and fire engine reds to pure whites. Some white-flowered species produce intense fragrances to entice pollinators in the wild, that pervade the home with scents seldom enjoyed beyond a tropical mountainside. Flowers, tubular or open-bell-shaped, are unusually long lasting and plants are generally everblooming. They have lepidote foliage and are drought tolerant. In most cases they do not readily hybridize with hardier Asiatic rhododendrons. Their beauty alone is worth the plant explorers' struggles through uncharted, snake-infested jungles that harbor blackwater fever and malaria. The natives of these lands, not always welcoming, have customs unfamiliar to Westerners, such as drying their dead relatives and arranging them around their huts. After a long and perilous history that threatened obscurity to Vireya rhododendrons, these pioneers can feel proud of their victories. They preserve a tradition begun by Victorian horticulturists in England with the discovery of a Vireya called *Rhododendron malayanum* in 1823 by an official of the East India Company, Dr. William Jack.

*Rhododendron lochae*
Drawings by Lucie Sorensen

Vireyas rose to prominence in England with the work of the James Veitch nursery which produced over 200 hybrids by 1897. The hardships of World War I made the keeping of greenhouses and conservatories a luxury even the well-to-do could not afford. Many large gardens were abandoned. The result was the loss of all but ten or twelve of the Victorian hybrids in Great Britain. Remnants of the 19th Century work remembered today are 'Ne Plus Ultra', a true Christmas red; 'Triumphans', the reverse cross of 'Ne Plus Ultra' between 'Dutchess of Edinburgh' and *Rhododendron javanicum*; 'Princess Alexandra'; 'Red Prince'; 'Sybil', a clear pink that resulted from the joint work of Veitch and Lionel de Rothschild; 'Taylori', a pure pink; 'Sir George Holford'; 'Souvenir of J.H. Mangles'; R. brookeanum var. gracile, fluorescent coral-orange; 'Pink Seedling'; and 'Pink Delight'. But Vireyas were much too beautiful to be forgotten forever. In the late 1930s, the director of the Singapore Botanical Gardens, R.E. Holttum, believed Vireyas were suited to the hot, humid climate of his city and began collecting them from Malaysia. War again interfered. When the Japanese invaded Malaysia at the outbreak of World War II, Holttum's pursuit of Vireyas ended and all of his hybrids were lost.

Interest revived in the early 1950s, perhaps as a result of Westerners being drawn into the Malaysian forests in the name of war. Botanical expeditions followed. The German Hermann Sleumer, who had studied Vireya rhododendrons systematically for many years, undertook an expedition in 1961, of which the American Rhododendron Society was a sponsor. He introduced hundreds of new species that set the base for the current popularity of Vireyas. The National Arboretum in Washington, D.C., had the foresight to acquire some of the British plants in the early 1950s. These were propagated, and in 1961 plants were made available in limited numbers.

Some went to the Strybing Arboretum in San Francisco, and these, with Sleumer's species, and others from friends of the arboretum in Australia and Great Britain, were used to develop new plants suitable for the San Francisco Bay Area. Progress at Strybing was such that by 1969 plants could be sent to several interested California growers. It was as well that this was done, for in a few years most of the plants at Strybing Arboretum were destroyed.

Most of the Vireyas were planted on a normally frost-free hillside in the arboretum. On a night in December 1972, the temperature unexpectedly dropped to 23° F. and remained below 32° F. for some time. The plants on the hill were lost; only those in greenhouses were saved. Many lost heart and interest in Vireyas waned, but at Strybing Arboretum the collection was rebuilt. Many of those who had received plants from the Arboretum in 1969 were able to send cuttings or young plants back again. Several amateur rhododendron enthusiasts in the San Francisco Bay Area helped and eventually hybridization of Vireyas began again at Strybing Arboretum.

In Southern California, where the climate seems more suitable for Vireyas than for most other rhododendrons, enthusiasts in the Southern California Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society had help and advice on growing them from the Strybing staff and many of them have since made their own contribution to the study and hybridization of Vireyas. In 1976 the collection of Vireyas at Strybing was hit again - not by the weather, but by a strike of city employees among whom were those at the Arboretum. During the difficulties that ensued several Vireyas were lost through theft and vandalism.

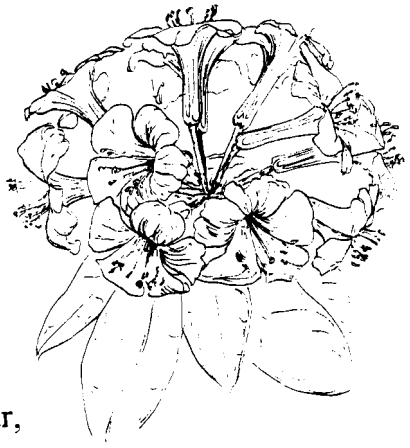
Their natural habitats give us guidance in cultivating Vireyas. Some Vireyas are epiphytic and are found in the mossy boughs of trees; others are terrestrial in the savannas and grasslands of New Guinea, Java, Borneo, Sumatra and other islands of the Malay Indonesian archipelago. In their tropical homes, they experience little year-round seasonal variation in temperature and daylight, but the monsoons bring intense rainstorms and long dry periods. To grow Vireyas as houseplants, use containers that can be easily transported. Keep them in a sunny southern windowsill or in a well-lighted room during winter months and move them outdoors after danger of frost is past. Return them to the house when fall temperatures again begin to drop to the low 40s. Vireyas are excellent for patios and porches.

In Southern California heat waves occasionally cause sharp humidity drops and growers there may need to use pots larger than usual to help keep the soil moist. As bedding plants in landscapes for mild winter areas, such as Southern California, Vireyas are best on the north and east sides of the house. If your region is subject to hot, dry, summer winds, shelter the plants with windbreaks. Screens of tall plants able to withstand wind will retain moist air near the Vireyas. Should you plant on the south and west sides of the house, protect the plants from hot late morning and afternoon sun with filtered shade from trees, laths or shade cloth.

Vireyas are generally best in raised beds two feet wide and fifteen inches deep, or in large pots and tubs. The growing medium should be a soil-free mix that is acidic and porous. A loose, well-aerated medium that allows quick drainage can be mixed from equal parts of screened five-eighths inch bark - redwood, hemlock, or fir (this is sold as orchid bark); coarse peat moss (greenhouse grind); and coarse perlite. Do not use packaged orchid mixes, bromeliad mixes, supersoil, or azalea planter mixes, and avoid finely ground peat.

Direct sun from sunrise until 11 AM is ideal light conditions and filtered sunlight thereafter. Fluorescent lights can supplement natural light indoors. If humidity is high and your climate is generally cool, Vireyas can tolerate more direct sunlight. The closer you are to the equator, the more need you may have for sunlight-filtering devices. A 60 percent shaded lath cover, or 55 percent polypropylene shade cloth can be used where no light is filtered by trees.

Never allow Vireyas to freeze; however, they will tolerate short periods down to 30° F, some even to 25° F. They can stand summer temperatures of 105° F or more, with proper humidity. Average temperatures should vary overall 10° to 20° F. from summer to winter with an average daytime temperature of 70° F. and an average nighttime temperature of 45° F. On the other hand, some experienced growers report that when grown as houseplants, better performance is achieved if they are in rooms where the greatest variation in temperature - night to day is allowed. Keep plants on the dry side but increase watering during major flowering periods, usually between October and March, and while plants are very young. Avoid a continually soggy mix. Water thoroughly and then withhold water until the medium is light and dry again. Water early in the day and do not mist houseplants often as moisture in static air encourages mildew. Fertilize several times in spring and early summer, and shortly after flower buds first appear, with a half-strength, or less, solution of fish fertilizer or liquid fertilizer such as Rapid-Gro or Peters. Dilute the fertilizer even more if foliage shows signs of damage. (Southern California Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society has developed a special formulation for Vireyas which overcomes the alkaline water conditions peculiar to that region. This fertilizer is available to Chapter members.)



*Rhododendron auriger anum*

Prune and pinch young plants to encourage bushy growth. From the time plants are a few inches high until they are two-and-a-half years old, pinch out any single apical buds as they begin to elongate. Buds begin to form nine months ahead of flowering so you may prevent blooming if you delay pinching. To prune plants older than four years, establish a routine of cutting out a third of the plant each year. Cut branches that have flowered back to the lowest healthy rosette of leaves. Mulching the surface of the soil, outdoors or in pots, retains moisture and keeps roots cool. Use the longest needles of spruce, cedar or pine trees - avoid the short, fine ones or use coarse bark.

While Vireyas seem safe at last in the United States, they are now threatened with extinction in their native habitat. In removing the trees, timber harvesters are destroying many kinds of rhododendrons in Indonesia and Malaysia as they move across broad tracts of tropical forest. Great increases in population in tropical countries are creating demands for food production that accelerate the destruction in the forest. Information on this was given by Dr. W.L. Theobald in Pacific Horticulture, Summer 1980. The U.S. National Academy of Science pointed out in July 1980 that all tropical forests will be destroyed within the next fifty years at the present rate of exploitation. Perhaps the lowered thermostats and reduced yard space of American homes, along with intelligent propagation and hybridizing, will insure a place for Vireyas. To see them is to know that they are too lovely ever to be lost again.

*Note: Margaret Adams worked for Lucie Sorensen at The Bovees Nursery at the time she wrote this article in 1981.*

From Fran Ruferford Port Orchid, Washington
Dear VV, January 7, 2004

This in reply to John Bodenham question about split corollas. Yes, anyone living and growing vireyas in less than ideal climates is going to experience split corollas from time to time. In my experience, the lowland vireyas are more apt to have split corollas than those from higher elevations. This would indicate to me that sudden temperature variations are the main culprit. Fortunately, this is not a permanent condition and blooms will be normal on the next cycle. At the Rhododendron Species Foundation, mature plants of *R. zoelleri* that are kept in the cooler greenhouse and are subjected to greater temperature variation, have this problem.

Some years back, I received a packet of seeds of a Triumphs x *brookeanum* cross. Only, a few of these germinated but I was able to grow them on to flowering. All of the flowers on this plant had spilt corollas and the same problem occurred every flowering for years. Finally, I gave up and discarded the plants. Obviously, this was not a climatic problem but somehow the plants genes had been altered. Most of my problems with split corollas have been with hybrids of *R. christianae.* Although, I have not had any split corollas with small bell shape flower types, other abnormalities do occur. Often, one truss will have perfect color and another truss will come into bloom much later with pale flowers. Misshapened florets often occur in late autumn and early winter. Right now this has occurred with a plant of *planecostatum.* During the winter, all my plants are in a glass greenhouse. Trying to keep the greenhouse at 40 F (or better is a major problem). A week ago in the Puget Sound area it was 70 F (21.1 C) degrees during the day and 40 F (4.4 C) at night. The past few days it has been 25 F (-3.9 C) during the day and 20 F (-6.7 C) at night. Plants near the glass are apt to have problem

The Hages family experience (from the Internet). "Kaye & myself have also experienced this phenomenon, either all corollas in the truss have split or sometimes only the odd one. We have put this down to sudden temperature change. The temperature here in southern Tasmania (Australia) can fluctuate very quickly going from mid 30 C to 15 C (86-59 F) in a relative short time. I suppose something has to give".

The Barry Davidson experience.. "We grow vireyas at 43 degrees south in a coastal area. They do surprisingly well as we are frost-free. Split corollas seem to occur on all our vireyas, but only in the summer. Once we get a hot day – over 5 degrees Celsius (41F) – then from that period on, split corollas just keep coming. Typically our weather is mild to cool, but our summers can have the occasional hot northerly winds. It may be the combination of dry with heat, but other times of the year can be very dry too and split corollas only occur in summer and early autumn. Our rainfall is about 500mm, or 20 inches, and fairly evenly distributed, which makes our light summer rainfalls fairly useless. Water is freely available though and we use without hesitation. The air is still dry".

"I think that mutations are random and specific mutations are not stimulated by the environment. However, corolla splitting may be a general defect that is for some reason perhaps not revealed in the wild and hence there is no environmental pressure against it? The environment can lead to a gene being turned on."

George Argent says that in the past they have had some difficulty with young plants aborting flower buds as the day gets shorter and darker, but with additional artificial illumination using halogen grow lights to extend the day length to 12 hours eliminates this problem and improves the health of plants over the winter period. George Argent and Louise Galloway have an excellent article on vireyas in the "The Garden" December 2003 issue.

Fran Rutherford
6301 Clover Valley RD.
Port Orchard, WA 98366

From Ray Steele, Devon, U. K.
Dear Vireya Vine, Feb, 14 04

**Hardiness in Vireyas**

After spending the last five Christmases in New Zealand as fugitives from the English winters, though visiting relatives was the excuse, last year we had Christmas in U.K. Having been inspired originally by John Kenyon's excellent book, over the years I have acquired a hundred or so different vireyas. During the winter, these are stood on a sand-covered bench in the greenhouse with a soil-warming cable below the sand set at a temperature of 45 F. They are then left alone for a couple of months or so while Anne and I are in New Zealand after enduring the tropical climes in S.E. Asia for a while as we break the long journey. Vietnam last year and Laos the year before certainly gave food for thought - every American should go there but that is another story.

Every year, the original plants get larger and being a compulsory propagator (horticulturally speaking) I have raised many extra plants from cuttings - having carried out pruning, it seemed a shame to throw good material away. The inevitable has now happened and I am running short of the bench space necessary to accommodate the vireyas through the winter. As winter approached last year, I brought the plants inside from their summer standing-out bed and began a sardine-packing exercise. It was obviously something of a quart in a pint pot situation.

I decided to plant out some of the duplicates in the oak wood just below the house and let them take their chance. Of the ten or so planted without any form of protection, all have survived so far. Winters are inclined to be fairly mild here in the South-West but we have had some moderate frosts during the winter.

It would certainly be premature to suggest that vireyas could become established outdoors in Britain but it may well be that some of the hardier ones might survive especially if they could be given the kind of winter covering which is the standard practice with tree, ferns and others. I fear that they are unlikely to receive any TLC in the form of regular watering and this may yet prove their undoing before the year is out - time will tell.

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From Lyn Craven Canberra, Australia
Dear VV, March 2004 **Beat this record**

One of the negatives of growing plants under borderline conditions is that one must be content with obtaining indifferent results. In my case, I have an overcrowded greenhouse that is inadequately heated in winter and ditto cooled in summer. Despite this, I am usually successful in keeping plants alive. Species needing additional warmth, such as *R. intranervatum*, will not grow, and, as with many other growers, some species are probably too strongly adapted to a specialised environment, such as several of the high altitude New Guinea species that are just

unthrifty in cultivation and eventually fade away. In spite of the marginal environment in my greenhouse most species flower, with some plants such as *gracilentum*, *leptanthum*, *wrightianum*, *viriosum*, *anagalliflorum*, etc flowering annually.

But not all. Some things are just shy flowerers. Whether this is due to the need for the plant to replenish resources after flowering or is because the plant is just not "happy" I do not know. And there is a third category; things that apparently do not know what flowering means. These are the record breakers. The current record in terms of years to flower is held by a plant of *superbum*. It took 27 years from setting roots to flowering, and then all it had was one 2-flowered inflorescence. [For the record, the flowers were a shell pink throughout.] The flowering took place last summer and I don't know when it will flower again; there are no floral buds set on it this year. This form of *superbum* was collected by Don Stanton and Lou Searle in 1972 and the propagation material brought back by Don was established by the Botanic Gardens in Canberra, from which I obtained a plant propagated in 1975. The collecting details are: Searle & Stanton # 20, PNG, Chimbu Province, No.2 Dom, 7500-8000 ft.

I would have done better with planting a *Magnolia campbellii*.

[For those who do not know much about Canberra's climate, Canberra is at Lat 35 18 S, Long 149 08 E, at about 600 m asl and has a continental climate due to its inland situation. Average winter minima/maxima are 0/11 Centigrade in July, and summer minima/maxima are 13/28 Centigrade in January.]

Lyn Craven, Canberra, Australia

***Yes, Lyn is saying that some Vireyas are very slow blooming. I also have a plant of superbum that has not yet bloomed. Go it in 1978 as a rooted cutting directly from Papua New Guinea. The plants and cuttings came into the Species Foundation but at the time they could not care for them and Fran Rutherford and I were more than happy to do so. So my plant is 26 years old and hasn't bloomed yet. Great big thing with wonderful dark scaly leaves. It roots easy enough and I have given away many rooted plants. Wonder if any of them have bloomed? Sure hope it is good when it does bloom.***

***People often wonder why some species take so long to bloom andI tell them that is just nature doing its thing. In nature (in the wild) Rhododendrons can often live for hundreds of years and their only real job is to make a few seeds that grow into new plants.***

***Another plant that we think is slow to bloom is our form of R. x sheilae, said to be a natural hybrid between R. abietifolium x buxifolium from Mt. Kinabalu. Ours is a great-looking small grower with very distinct leaves. Ours has only bloomed once, about four years ago. It had deep purple-red flowers and was very nice. OK, how come? Probably the reason this time is that we just do not have a good blooming clone. I wonder if this species blooms well at Edinburgh or elsewhere?? E. White***

See Chris Callard's wonderful Web site at www.vireya.net
Get into this group and let's talk about Vireyas www.groups.yahoo.com/group/vireya

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