

# VIREYA VINE

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RHODODENDRON SPECIES FOUNDATION

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E. White Smith, Editor

From John Bodenham  
Dear Vireya Vine,

August 2005  
Plymouth, England

Firstly, it is about time I sent off a financial contribution. Enclosed \$10. Keep up the good work, White & Fran. Secondly, I was most interested in the letters in VV#76.

Perhaps those contributors can explain the plant I have. It originated from Bill Mearns in Australia as a cutting, labeled either 'Pink leucogigas', or 'Leucogigas Pink Form'. I have always attributed it to an event reported in 'The Rhododendron', volume 31, Spring 1991, page 8, in an article by Dr. R N Withers, regarding the History of the Introduction of Vireya Rhododendron Species into Cultivation in Australia, under 'leucogigas', which says

"A pink form of *R. leucogigas* was received by Bill Mearns from Welensky, a forester in West Irian, in 1973".

Dr. George Argent does not think it to be *leucogigas*! at all. The flowers look a bit like the one White reported as having flowered recently, but not as good, and fewer per truss, and they fade quite badly. The plant is quite vigorous and is now almost 3ft high; far more vigorous than the example of *leucogigas* introduced by Sleumer, held at Edinburgh. George suggested it was perhaps a hybrid of *konori*. Incidentally, it doesn't look very much like the Brian Clancy photograph of 'Gardenia Odyssey' on page 7 of VV#76 either. Mine has 7-lobed scented flowers which start off quite pink but quickly lose the pink to become a dull creamy colour. Yet the material source is reported to be identical. Is there something wrong somewhere? Any suggestions?

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From Brian Oldham  
Dear VV,

Auckland, New Zealand (North Island)  
August 2005

I continue to be impressed with the difficulties and the diligence that the "Vine" readers around the world experience in growing these remarkable plants.

My wife Jan and I have been growing Vireyas in Auckland city since 1987, being the first to do so on any scale for the area. Perhaps the "Vine" readers would be interested in our local conditions and methods which seem a breeze compared with others.

Auckland city is a narrow isthmus between two harbours, a cool and stormy one to the west and a warm and tranquil one to the east. The prevailing wind is from the cool west to the east. It is seldom calm for more than a day. Although breezes can be 30 to 40 Km/hour, most days gales are rare. Humidity is always high at 75 to 90%. Summer temperatures peak at 25 to 27C (77 to 80F) with the odd day at 30C plus (86F). Overnight lows are around 16 to 18C (60 to 66F). Winters are a different story with 16 to 18C in daytime and 4 to 10C (39 to 50F) at night with the occasional radiation frost on clear nights between rain squalls. These frost drop the grass temperatures to -2 to 4C (- 28 to - 24F) for an hour or so just before dawn, although the air temperature remains just above freezing.

We grow our Vireyas unprotected in the open garden year-long, but the odd ground frost in some years is cold enough to nip the tender new leaves and flowers but does no lasting damage. Not for us the heated greenhouse and the mass movement of pots in shelter!

North and south of the central city the ground frost can be quite severe in places, with drifts of freezing taking out vireyas even in the shade houses. Snow has never fallen in Auckland. At latitude 37°S our summer sun is very strong especially in ultraviolet light and this can result in a little leaf burning (37°S equals Gibraltar and Tunisia in the northern hemisphere). White Smith has commented on the thickness of the plant leaves here.

Rainfall is heavy in the winter but summers are dryish so summer watering is a must, and an odious chore for big pots. Prolonged winter rains pose problems of drainage for plants in the ground with our clay soil. Nonetheless we tend to have "weather" rather than "climate".

The basic soil type is a heavy white clay, like putty when wet and a brick when dry, but there are frequent local areas of very light volcanic ash from the sixty odd minivolcanoes that have erupted within the metropolitan area in the last 40,000 years. The clays are acidic and poorly drained while the volcanoes are basaltic, alkaline at pH 7.5 and very free draining. We garden on the later, a tuff ring of 2,000 year old explosion crater.

In this environment growing vireyas is very rewarding. As everywhere, the species are difficult and require much TLC. A bit of hybrid vigour allows for a very wide range of plants with minimal protection. The species and javanicum hybrids are very prone to frost and cold wind damage.

We plant both in pots and in the open garden. Having pioneered vireya growing in Auckland we have perfected a planting technique for the region. Siting is best in light, dappled shade although a halfday of direct sun is required. Our plants, and other peoples do very well in full sun.

We are fortunate in having unlimited supplies of pine bark in all grades, (Pinus radiata an American west coast species) but it is naturally nitrogen leaching so requires a presale treatment with CAN (calcium ammonium nitrate, so called). We plant in the open ground entirely in fine #1 grade CAN bark re-enforced with 6 to 9 month fertilizer with trace elements and a suitable NPK ratio. We do not use peat as it holds too much water in winter and is difficult to rehydrate if it dries out in summers. Likewise the commercial specialized vireya potting mixes, of which there are excellent ones available cheaply, have little or no peat.

In heavy clay soils we have advocated planting on a free-draining shelf or slope, or above ground on the flat, while retaining the planting mix with logs, bricks or stones. There was a vogue for planting vireyas in hollowed-out fibrous logs of the large native tree ferns but the roots invade the fern pot and make removal for repotting next to impossible.

After 17 or 18 years in pots some of our *R. leucogigas* hybrids are 2 metres tall, with their roots filling 1 ½ metre pots, the maximum size we can handle. Now these plants are bounding away after being garden planted after all these years.

In this climate our principle diseases are Phytophthora and powdery mildew with variable problems with Botritis on the flowers from time to time. Pest are short-tongued bumble-bees and various wasp species that nip the base of the flowers to get at the nectarines. There is also a small bird, the waxeye or silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*) that does the same. The injury lets the Botritis fungus get a hold.

With such comparative ease of culture it is not surprising that vireyas have become widely used by the landscapers, although we have an ongoing battle to persuade them to plant them properly.

Brian Oldham & Jan  
102 Meadowbank Road  
Meadowbank, Auckland 1005 New Zealand

## **3<sup>rd</sup> Vireya Seminar Hilo Hawaii**

**February 17, 18, 19 2006**

**Aloha**

**The Hawaii Chapter – ARS invites you to attend our 3<sup>rd</sup> Vireya Seminar scheduled for Feb. 2006. We are pleased to once again have international vireya representation to stimulate your senses, as well as, fun and fellowship for your spirit. For more information, please contact Veryl Ann Grace at P.O. Box 1330, Keaau, HI 96749 or E-mail to [veryl.grace@verizon.net](mailto:veryl.grace@verizon.net)**

**February 17, 18, 19 2006**

**Seminar Hotel is --Hilo Hawaiian Hotel 71 Banyan Drive, Hilo, HI 96720  
Phone 808-935-9361 / Fax 808-969-6472 Web site [www.castleresorts.com](http://www.castleresorts.com)**

**Here's a brief summary of scheduled events:**

**Friday – Feb 17<sup>th</sup>**

*Private garden tours on your own.*

*Welcome gathering barbecue dinner*

**Saturday – Feb. 18<sup>th</sup>**

*Speakers at Hilo Hawaiian Hotel*

- 1. Neil Puddey, commercial vireya grower from Australia*
- 2. Kaye Hagan, private vireya grower from Tasmania*
- 3. Fred Rennick, private vireya grower from Southern California*
- 4. Graham Smith, Director of Pukeiti Gardens, New Zealand*
- 5. George Argent, retired taxonomist from the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh*

**Also planned is a demonstration on root pruning of vireya and a round table discussion**

**Sunday – Feb 19<sup>th</sup>**

**Paid garden tour**

*Closing fellowship gathering.*

E Komo Mai ... (Come on Over)

Sherla D. Bertelmann

Hawaii Chapter-ARS

[vireya@pacificislandnursery.com](mailto:vireya@pacificislandnursery.com)

From Bill Miller  
Dear Vireya Vine

Tacoma, Washington  
September 2005

### **Anecdotal evidence for “An Aspirin Every Quarter”.**

I read several months ago in The Avant Gardener newsletter about studies showing salicylic acid (aspirin) boosting the immune systems of many plants. A light went on and I recalled a story about my grandfather's use of cut up and smashed willow branches in a five gallon bucket to root plants. Willow tree bark tea was used by Native Americans to cure headaches because it is full of salicylic acid.

So armed with this article and my own genetic history of the use of aspirin water I proceeded to add one 325 mg aspirin pill to my regular foliar feed. I normally use a scoop of “Peters Professional Soluble Plant Food Acid Greening 17-6-6” in a gallon of water. I foliar spray this combined solution on the tops and bottoms of the leaves of every plant in the greenhouse every three months.

I honestly noticed a difference in a month, a lot of the fungus had disappeared and new buds were appearing. By the second spray, in the dead of winter, I started getting blooms on my Vireyas. Some had never bloomed before this.

I am moved to write this now because I have just come out of the most incredible smelling greenhouse. I have a *R. konori* that was grown from seed in 1993 that has bloomed for the first time and my 24' x 26' greenhouse smells wonderful. Also, the new foliage is amazing. I am taking cuttings again (yes, I spray all my cuttings). This year the Vireyas have grown an average of six inches and are putting out side branches.

It costs me exactly four aspirin every year and a LOT of eyeball rolling whenever I tell any of my gardener friends. So I keep it quiet but thought I should let the other readers of the Vireya Vine give it a try and see if it was worth four aspirin a year to get incredible growth and fantastic blooms. (I see your eyeballs rolling!)

Bill Miller  
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#### *Editor note*

*I need to get into this. Bill Miller is my new son-in-law as of a little over a year ago. He along with my daughter Julie are co-presidents of the Tacoma Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society. They live at my ex-father-in law, Elwood Budil's home in Tacoma. The property is about an acre in size and has hardy Rhodies dating back to just after WWII. There is also a good glass greenhouse that Julie and I have spent many happy hours keeping in good repair. Probably back 20 years ago Bill Moyles in Oakland California was sending Julie hands full of very small seedlings that he had test grown when he was the Vireya seed person for the world.*

*So Bill and Julie have quite a few Vireyas. The R. konori Bill is talking about, I grew from seed from John Rouse in Melbourne Australia. Bill has it in a big hanging pot and it had one huge truss on September 21<sup>st</sup>, so we took it to the Tacoma Chapter meeting. The strong fragrance filled the room. Great Stuff. EWS PS. WE have started using aspirin also.*

*And sometimes it is more than a good idea to blow people's horns. Bill Moyles handled the Vireya seed exchange for many years. Many of the seed lots were tested by Bill and lots of the small seedlings were passed on. Lucie and I here at Bovees Nursery owe Bill Moyles for many of our species, that he passed on to us or to other friends. Thanks Bill, Thanks.*

From Dick (Red) Cavander  
Dear Vireya Vine,

December 2005  
Sherwood, Oregon (Just east of Portland)

### **Greenhouse Freeze Alarm System**

Anyone that grows Vireyas, or any other tender plants, in a greenhouse in a cold winter area NEEDS a cold temperature alarm system. I found this out the hard way many years ago when my heater malfunctioned and I lost a big part of my collection. I did have an alarm but it malfunctioned as well.

An alarm system is not elaborate and anyone with a bit of mechanical skill can install one. The system described below will work with any type of heat system and the supplies should be available at any good hardware store.

A bit of background first. I have two greenhouses that I heat. One is a 95 foot long by 14 foot wide "poly tunnel house". It serves as a cool greenhouse in winter and a shade house in the summer. It has two layers of poly and a small (1/64 hp) squirrel cage fan that blows air between the layers. This inflates it and keeps the poly rigid. It has been very wind resistant and quite energy efficient. I heat it with an 80,000 BTU propane space heater. The heater looks like a jet engine and does a good job. I have a 500 gallon propane tank that supplies both houses. This heater could be supplied by a much smaller tank, however, I would recommend at least 15 gallon. I have used a kerosene heater of the same type but it requires refueling and that can be a problem during a long cold spell or if you are out of town. Kerosene is also costly if you buy in small quantities.

My other greenhouse is a commercial steel and fiberglass structure. This house is 24 by 40 feet with 9 foot side walls. It has only a one layer covering and is much less energy efficient. This house is heated with a 150,000 BTU hanging greenhouse heater. The heaters in both houses are thermostatically controlled.

There are a number of commercial greenhouse alarms on the market. Really fancy systems will even make a phone call! I have 2 Thermalarm monitors; however I have several complaints with them. One, the numbers on the dial face fade out in sunlight after a few years. Two, the contacts corrode and fail to complete the circuit. This was the cause of the failure years ago. I have since rewired the one in the greenhouse and it has worked fine since then. My monitors are some 15 or 20 years old so these problems may have been

corrected. These monitors are available with an outside horn but they require 120 v power. My system is battery operated.

I like a battery operated system because there is no shock hazard and it will operate even if the power is off. This can be critical! The lantern batteries will last for several years because they see very little use. When that bell goes off, you are out of bed NOW and turn it off. If it operated 5 minutes a year, that would be a lot. Admittedly, this system will not do any good if there is no one home but it has served me well for over 15 years. I always test the system every Fall by adjusting the thermostat or monitor to be sure the batteries are ok and all parts work.

After the failure years ago, I purchased a 2 stage thermostat for the poly house. The first stage turns on the heater and the second the alarm. The interval is adjustable. I like this thermostat as the switches are sealed in plastic and the only parts exposed to the environment are the wire attachments. Much less likelihood of corrosion. Really, any good 2 stage thermostat will work. Our home heatpump has 2 stages, heating and cooling, but you can connect the thermostat any way you wish. Be aware that thermostats are NOT always calibrated very well and a little experimentation may be required.

Wiring is rather straight forward. I used 2 conductor outdoor telephone wire. It is solid rubber with two 28 gauge wires. My poly house wire runs into the greenhouse and is connected, in parallel, to the monitor in there. That monitor is mounted next to the heater thermostat. From the greenhouse, the wire is strung overhead to the house. I entered the house through a gable vent. I then fished a wire down through an interior hall wall next to our door bell. These 2 wires meet in the attic and are wired in parallel to two 6 v. lantern batteries. I found that I needed 2 batteries as one was insufficient to power the bell.

My interior bell is really just a door bell. It operates on 6 or 12 volts. It has a nice plastic cover that the wife does not object to and does not stand out like a sore thumb. I did modify the bell by installing a switch on it so that it could be turned off while I went outside to find the problem. The mounting location is about 10 feet from our bedroom door and let me tell you, you will NOT sleep through it!

The mounting location for the indoor bell is not really critical. Any location where you can get wires to it, even the ceiling. In my system, one bell serves both houses. However, phone wire comes in 2, 4 or 6 conductor and several buildings could be served by one wire. A separate indoor bell could be used for each greenhouse as well. Several alarm locations could also be served such as your house, work building, etc. Larger batteries may be required but a little experimenting will soon tell you.

I really do hate it when that bell goes off but I would hate it even more to find the contents of my greenhouses frozen. The 100 bucks and day's work I spent on this system really does let me sleep better at night!

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See Chris Callard's wonderful Web site at [www.vireya.net](http://www.vireya.net)

Get into this group and let's talk about Vireyas [www.groups.yahoo.com/group/vireya](http://www.groups.yahoo.com/group/vireya)

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They also handle the Vireya seed exchange. WorldWide.

### VIREYA VINE

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