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# The Vireya Venture

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Issue No. 62 October 2006

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## Editorial

It appears to be a common phenomenon – very few letters contributed for publication in rhododendron newsletters, particularly those concerning vireyas.

E White Smith, editor of The Vireya Vine newsletter from the Rhododendron Species Foundation in Washington USA, didn't have a single letter to include in his issue # 79 of August 2006. He had to do what we do and reprint articles from early issues, back 20 years ago. I also know that Simon Begg, editor of the Rhododendron Newsletter of the Victorian Branch of the Aust. Rhodo. Soc. is keenly seeking articles for his monthly newsletter.

And again we don't have enough to fill this issue of T V V so we have had to reprint four articles from the early issues of this newsletter. Fortunately we did receive an email and some photos from Belgium and another email from the Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia. So the whole issue isn't just reprints.

Contributing to T V V is an easy enough thing to do. A quick note by mail or an Email to say hello and an attached photo or two about your vireyas. Don't just sit back and let others jump in. Let us hear about your story.

Please send your letters/articles to:

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Melbourne Victoria 3000 Australia  
Ph: +61 (0)3 9639 4493  
Fax: +61 (0)3 9639 5480

Preferably send something by Email to:

[lithic01@bigpond.net.au](mailto:lithic01@bigpond.net.au)

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*One of Hendrik's flowering seedlings (see letter below): Gardenia x Lemon Spice; from the Amer. Rhodo. Soc. Seedbank. Photos of other flowers from this cross are on the next page.*

## From Hendrik Van Oorst in Belgium

(This letter was also sent to Sherla Bertelmann, of the Hawaii Chapter of Am. Rhodo. Soc. for the Hawaii Chapter Newsletter)

November 1, 2006

Hello Sherla and Graham.

Here is some vireya news from Belgium.

First, something about our weather. We had terrible vireya weather this year. It was too cold until half of June (many fissured flowers) followed by a very hot and dry period with lots of leaf burn (temperatures above 35°C). It seems to me that vireyas don't grow if it is too hot. Fortunately August was very wet with temperatures of about 20°C and that is when they started growing again.

September and October brought us the good vireya weather with temperatures between 15 and 25°C. They produced many new flower buds which now are open. I am still amazed of the unusual flower colours at this time of the year.

We also had some first reactions of customers who bought a vireya last year, most of them already had their second or even third flowering. If there was a difficulty it was always associated with very aerated medium and too much or too little watering - to do it right you really need some green fingers.

This year we also had the first flowers on our seedlings from Sherla's ARS seedbank:

Gardenia x Lemon Spice - good fragrance and beautiful trusses of different yellow tones, all seedlings where compact growing;

*Below: Three of Hendrik's flowering seedlings Gardenia x Lemon Spice from the Amer. Rhodo. Soc. Seedbank.*



Another from the Seedbank was:

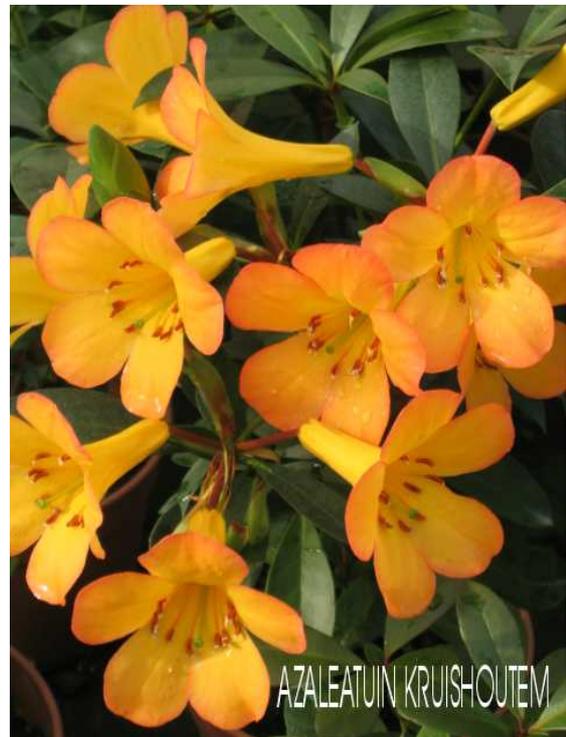
Neesa x *R. konori* - huge white flowers, three to four in a truss with a great fragrance, wild growing.



*Hendrik's flowering seedling Neesa x R. konori*

We also had the first flowers of our own crosses :

Anatta Gold x Leonora Francis - many different flower colours, flowering young (three years from seedling), only compact ones are left over, but there was a great difference in growing style, flower trusses of three to seven flowers;



*One of Hendrik's flowering seedlings: Anatta Gold x Leonora Francis - this one yellow with an orange/red flush on the petals.*



Another of Hendrik's flowering seedlings.  
*Anatta Gold x Leonora Francis* – this one red/pink  
 with a yellow throat.

And another (sorry no picture available) :

Thai Gold x *R. luraluense*; all slow and compact growing, many trusses of fine yellow flowers, all a little bit smaller than Thai Gold, no fragrance.

I am hoping that every vireyafiler in Belgium gets in his vireyas as we expect our first freezing nights soon.

So that's all for today. Wish you all the best  
 Hendrik Van Oost

#### Editor's reply.

Nice photos Hendrik. It must be a real joy to be getting the first flowers of seedlings from your own crosses.

You are facing your first freezing nights and have to bring your vireyas indoors. Here in Australia we are well into Spring and most vireyas have flowered or are flowering. While you face freezing weather we are facing drought and tough water restrictions. Guess we all have our own crosses to bear but at least we can share the thoughts and sympathise with each other.

What will you do with the better forms from the new seedlings? Multiply them up from cuttings and sell them through your nursery or just keep them as a collection? Do you have any specific plans when you hybridize?

Graham and Janet

## From Dale Schubert on the Gold Coast (southeast Queensland, Australia)

November 2006

Dear Graham,

Thankyou for including me on the Vireya Venue distribution list. As a relative newcomer to the cultivation of Vireya Rhododendrons I should make reference to the open, friendly nature of those growers whom I have contacted regards the procurement of different species.

A little about myself. Having been involved in the horticultural industry for a number of years and growing up with gardening parents, I had been aware of Vireyas for many years, but I had never quite been taken by some of the exuberant hybrids.

However, upon travelling to Borneo, Sumatra and Sulawesi in the late 90's, it was impossible not to notice the Rhododendrons growing amongst and between Nepenthes, orchids and all manner of other unusual and exotic plant genera within the montane zones of these islands. I have one vivid recollection of a brilliant orange Vireya growing epiphytically some 15-20m off the ground on Gunung Talang in central Sumatra.

On reflection and with a little investigation it would appear to have been *R. javanicum*, which, although nothing particularly rare in cultivation, presented at the time like an orange beacon in a sea of green – not to be quickly forgotten (and contrasting somewhat with my initial view of exuberant hybrids.....).

I also recall other Vireya species upon the summits and/or ridgelines of mountains such as Gunung Kinabalu and G. Trusmadi, however these were relatively diminutive and sombre in their flowering compared to *R. javanicum*. Growers travelling to view the habitat of vireya Rhododendron would also have noted it can be difficult to identify plants from the scramble of vegetation in montane forest, let alone access plants in the oft-precipitous terrain.

So yes, afraid to say I am one of those who prefer to persevere growing a multitude of different species with their varying cultural requirements, rather than taking the more

'sensible' course of cultivating more 'user friendly' hybrids.

I find the variation between the hundreds of *Vireya* species to be one of the section's most interesting traits. It quickly became apparent that there would be a species suited to cultivation in most moderate climatic zones and certainly enough to present an enthusiast with a challenge for more than one lifetime !

It is also refreshing to note that there appears to be a solid core of growers cultivating species and that the American Seed Exchange has a good representation of species seed available for purchase at reasonable prices. It would be fantastic to see more growers contributing seed of rare and unusual species to allow their wider cultivation by patient growers ! Although not providing instant gratification, I imagine this is the most effective way of disseminating *Vireya* widely, whilst avoiding bureaucratic entanglement.

It's taken a few years for me to pick up the 'Vireya scent' again after I moved from Melbourne to the Gold Coast, but I hope in the future to have the opportunity to meet or converse with growers (of both species and hybrids) and also travel to vireya habitats to view more of these intriguing plants in their native domains.

Dale

#### Editor's comments.

Dale told me separately that he had photos from his travels in Indonesia but they appear to have been lost (misplaced) when he moved.

I know that quite a few vireya enthusiasts have visited places like Indonesia and the Island of New Guinea to see vireyas. I am envious. I considered making such a visit some years ago but work circumstances didn't give me the time. These days I wouldn't be able to undertake the walking and climbing that would inevitably be involved. So, I must be content to listen to others, look at photos and read accounts of their journeys.

Here's a question; do any T V V readers have photos of vireyas in their natural habitats? Perhaps you could send us copies (via Email or Snailmail) so we can put together a collection for inclusion in a future edition of T V V.

Graham Price

## Photos from our Garden

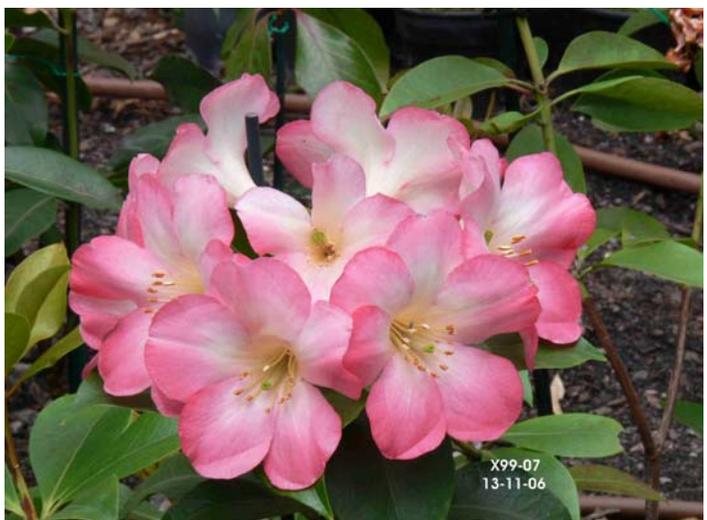
by Graham Price

The following seven photos, plus one on page 6, are some of the first flowerings of our seedlings from a complex cross made in 1997. The cross was:

{(*R. phaeocephalum* x *R. zoelleri*) x *R. Superbum*}

x

{[*R. laeatum* x *R. aurigeranum*] x *R. zoelleri* Island Sunset] F2}



## Reprints from the 1990s

### Editors.

Because of the lack of contributions from subscribers we are again including reprints of articles from the early issues of T V V. We have chosen ones that are both interesting to us and likely to be interesting to vireya novices.

We have retained the original spellings, but any errors or departures from the original articles are due to our poor typing. We are not sure who was the author of the first article, but we have our suspicions.

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Reprinted from The Vireya Venture, Issue #1, September 1990, p5.

### A BEGINNER'S GUIDE to THREE SPECIES

When I first started growing Vireyas I was more successful with the hybrids. They flowered earlier and grew more vigorously, so I put the species in the 'too hard' basket. Now that I have become more familiar with their peculiarities I find them more rewarding so I'll share a few of my lurks with you.

*R. macgregoriae*, *R. lochae*, and *R. javanicum* were among my first species. *R. macgregoriae* grew quite vigorously until its first flowering, which was quiet spectacular. The whole bush disappeared under the orange and yellow pompoms and when the petals dropped every flower produced a fat seed pod. This explained to me why they are the most common species in P.N.G., covering whole hillsides, making a breathtaking sight for anyone flying by, according to my friend Lou Searle. As the pods developed the plant looked weaker and weaker until quite a few branches died back. Finally the penny dropped and I pulled off every pod straight after flowering and applied a general fertilizer. I also found that regular feeding made the difference between a suicidal shrub flowering itself to death and a glossy, handsome one.

*R. lochae*, our one and only native species of Vireyas, was another early disappointment. I potted my specimen in the same open mix that I use for all Vireysa but it sulked for years. Then I read an article on *R. lochae's* original habitat and the light dawned. In the wild it grows on rocks, sometimes in the company of



rock lilies ('lithophytic' being the learned name for this habit). Apparently the roots travel down cracks in the rocks to reach moisture and nutrients, obviously not a situation easily reproduced in a garden. I guessed that the easiest way to provide the necessary aeration would be a fibre hanging basket, or by adding extra bark to the mix. Both of these tricks proved successful.

*R. javanicum*, a stunning native of Java with an unusually elaborate orange flower for a *Vireya*, grows quite well for me. But the large fleshy leaves often had an ugly red discoloration on the tips of the leaves and yellow flecks on the rest of it. This proved to be common rust. I could not understand why other *Vireyas* growing close by were unaffected by the disease. Then I heard that New Zealand growers in their cooler climate are plagued by rust on most of their *Vireyas*. About the same time I read that *R. javanicum* occurs naturally from sea level to under 2000ft. suggesting that it is indeed a tropical plant, whereas most other *Vireyas* need the cold provided by greater altitudes. Putting two and two together I moved *R. javanicum* to the warmest position in the garden and cured its rust problem. Friends in Brisbane report rust free javanicum. Rust by the way, can be defeated by any of the commercial anti-rust fungicides.

So despite the fact that *Vireya* species are slower to flower than their hybrids I have proved, at least to myself, that they need not be difficult – and I am hooked!

From our Mullumbimby Correspondent.

#### Editor's comments.

These are good lessons for all of us. Regular deadheading after flowering so as not to drain a plant's strength, and an open growing medium, good plant location and cool/warm air that reproduce something of the plant's natural habitat.

It needs to be remembered that most *vireyas* have only been in cultivation for at most 60 years and generally much less. Their genetics haven't changed much (even for hybrids) from adaptations developed for their natural environments. That is, we haven't done much selection for varieties better suited to conditions in our home gardens – though this does happen every time we discard poor

seedlings and persist with selected varieties that do better than others.

So, as enthusiasts we should be aware of and try to reproduce conditions that resemble those from where the plant (or parents) was collected. Some are truly hot/moist tropicals (like *R. javanicum*), others are epiphytes in trees, others are lithophytic among rocks (like *R. lochiaae*), others thrive in the cold misty conditions of high mountain tops.

But! What does one do if we make crosses of plants from widely different environments?

I too can confirm that rust (and powdery mildew) will give everyone problems if plants are kept under unsuitable conditions. I first encountered rust when I lived on a cool mountain top and my *vireyas* didn't receive enough sun or warmth. It disappeared when I took the plants to the much sunnier and hotter conditions in Perth, Western Australia and planted them into the ground in an organic rich soil.

Rust reappeared when the plants were kept tightly packed on benches in a shadehouse in suburban Melbourne. It has again disappeared now they are planted in an open garden bed and get lots of breeze and sun.

In fact I have never lost a *vireya* plant once it has been planted in the open ground rather than kept in pots. That's one lesson I have learnt.

Graham Price



Another first flowering of a seedling from the cross given on page 4.

Ed. [More comments on plant conditions and rust follows in this next article.](#)

Reprinted from The Vireya Venture Issue #7, April 1992, p5

Alan Raper of Rhodo Glen Wholesale Nurseries, Georges Road, The Patch, Victoria 3792, writes of a problem he has had:

“Looking at my Vireya collection, I considered I must do something about plants that were causing me constant Rust and Mildew problems. The first plant that went into the rubbish bin was ‘Clorinda’ – a lovely plant I had had for many years, always smothered in rust unless sprayed.

Another troublesome plant was *R. zoelleri*, a plant from the Arisumi collection. I had a batch of these and took them away from the other Vireyas and put them in a plastic covered area, where I keep the winter dampness and moisture levels low on some special Agave plants. I put them in saucers as this area is watered irregularly. They already had a considerable amount of mildew and rust on them and were not sprayed but isolated. The plastic on the roof of this area was not white-washed for the coming summer, so they were in a particularly bright, hot environment.

Although we have had quite a cool, wet summer in Melbourne this year, we have still had the odd day, nearing 40°, so with these conditions you would surely only expect some burned cinders to remain. Instead I have plants that are totally free of disease and looking exceptionally happy, which I have never been able to obtain with this form of *R. zoelleri* before. My conclusion to this observation – that many of the problems we are having with these plants are coming from where we think they should grow and our idea of the plant’s requirements.

Two plants of the same variety were put in this same area closer to the summer and these did burn, so when exposing Vireyas to more heat and light it becomes obvious that this needs to be done – give them maximum time to acclimatize to the change.”

Reprinted from The Vireya Venture Issue #1, September 1990, p8.

### COUNT THE PETALS

There are almost 300 species of Vireyas and it is usual for them to have five petals and ten stamens in a flower. However there are nine species that have up to eight petals – usually six to seven – and these include some of the best known and most frequently grown of the species. These are *Rhododendrons konori*, *phaeopeplum*, *hellwigii*, *superbum* and *dianthosmum* with six or seven petals, *leucogigas* with seven petals and *gardenia* with five to eight petals. Two others, *Rhododendrons pachystigma* and *thauasianthum* are not in cultivation and have only been collected once.

One of the interesting things about crossing these with other Vireyas that have only five petals is that the hybrids, in my limited experience, always have some flowers with more than five petals. This may then be a check on the truth of the cross. Is this so?

J. Clyde Smith, Wollongong

Reprinted from The Vireya Venture Issue #7, April 1992, p4.

“The following notes are from Barry Paget of Orchidworld Nursery, 1422 New Cleveland Road, Capalaba West, Queensland, 4157. He writes: I was most interested to read Mr Lou Searle’s article in the recent ‘Vireya Venture’ regarding leaves dying back from the tip, as I have also experienced this when the weather has been hot and dry as it has been here in southern Queensland, especially during November, December and January. I have noted this difficulty, especially where there has been even minor dryness within the container housing the plants.

My local D.P.I. ([Ed. Department of Primary Industry](#)) representative investigated such leaves and came up with the conclusion that the infection is *Glomerella* sp., related to *Anthraco*. This disease, it appears, is active while the leaf surface is moist and once it dries out, the organism becomes dormant until the leaf surface is again moist. This phenomenon causes difficulties when

investigating such pathogens. 'Octave' has been recommended and I am currently running trials to investigate its effectiveness. It seems such diseases as Anthracnose in its many forms are mainly tropical and sub-tropical and are seldom encountered in more temperate climes.

I wish also to mention the use of baskets for the culture of Vireyas, a trial I have conducted over a few years. Knowing these plants are in need of excellent drainage and that many species are actually epiphytic, I started trialling some of the smaller leaf types, such as *R. jasminiflorum*, in round wire baskets with pre-formed coconut fibre liners. Such plants are usually placed into 200mm or 250mm baskets depending on their size. It is essential to use good quality basket liners, even if they are a little expensive, as I nearly lost one plant of 'Pacific Shower' which I purchased already housed in a basket lined with mattress fibre which rotted and disintegrated. I will trial shade cloth as an alternative basket lining material.

I use my usual mixture of composted pine bark, fine charcoal, Perlite and sand, and have found growth to be excellent. It concerns me that some growers are using potting mixes suited to the culture of indoor plants and failing miserably with Vireyas. Following my early success with 'Pacific Shower' and *jasminiflorum*, I have trialled a number of larger leaf/larger growing species and am overjoyed with the results.

Some of the larger species and hybrids I am leaving well alone, such as *laetum*, 'Wattle Bird' etc ... and those plants which are strongly upright in their growth. Plants which usually grow to just over one metre appear to be very satisfactory. Vireyas respond so positively to pruning. It has been very interesting to gauge reactions from some of the more experienced growers when I talk of some of my conquests.

A number of the miniature species and hybrids such as *quadrasianum* are doing very well as are larger species such as *lochae*, *orbiculatum*, *phaeochitum* and *multicolour*. The last mentioned of these species I had difficulties maintaining until I was able to provide them with the increased drainage.

I suppose that I might have been one of the 'experienced growers' whose reaction would be sceptical of growing large leafed Vireyas in baskets if I had no memories of epiphytic Vireyas in Papua New Guinea. There is a photo on page 39 of the book 'Vireya Rhododendrons' of a complete plant of *R. superbum* taken at 3000m on the Kandep Divide after it had been collected from near the top of a tall tree. The root ball is held in the hand of our helper, Pundia Lepi. It would fit loosely into a 150mm container. By contrast we also found on Mt Gahavisuka a plant of *R. superbum* in flower, but this was some 3m or more in height, growing on the top of a red soil bank.

Vireyas may be naturally terrestrial plants but most of them will also grow epiphytically. They will survive in favourable conditions with a very small root ball and consequentially restricted growth. They are not rare – more than a hundred flowering plants of *R. superbum* were counted in one valley. Under forest conditions the only way they can get enough light to survive is to grow on top of the trees. They have to grow on very little nourishment, perhaps from frequent showers bearing nitrogen from lightning, from dust and minerals from native fires, and from the decomposing bryophytes on which the seed has germinated."

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#### From the Editors

That's the end of another issue of The Vireya Venture. The next, Issue # 63, is scheduled for production and distribution in January 2007.



*Again, its goodnight from YumYum and Buster – they think they can just go to sleep lying on me.*