

The Vireya Venture.

THE VIREYA VENTURE No.6 JANUARY 1992

This year has started very well for many of us with enough rain having fallen to ease the drought and to give some relief from watering. We can hope for a return to more stable weather conditions and bigger and better Vireyas!

There have been a number of interesting comments published in gardening journals in the last few months that are appropriate to the rhododendron scene and some of these are recorded later. However there was one noticeable omission from these magazines - there are practically no advertisements for Vireyas! One would think that either no one sells them or no one wants them. However it is more likely that the demand is still exceeding supply and therefor there is little point in paying to advertise what cannot be supplied. Foothills Nursery and the Vireya Venue support the Australian Rhododendron Society with their advertisements, Hilton Nursery has an advert in 'Your Garden' and the only other mention was a photo of a Vireya label in'Australian Horticulture'.

No doubt there are some of our readers who would like to know where they might at some time obtain a desired species or hybrid, so if you have Vireyas to sell and care to send details here they will be included in a future issue. Just send in your name,address, wholesale or retail and whether mail orders can be supplied.

Your comments, criticism, articles and suggestions are needed to make this newsletter of general interest in all garden aresa of Australia. Please send them to:

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IN SEARCH of the PERFECT LOCHAE

Mrs S.Saperstein of Main Arm, Mullumbimby, 2482, writes:-

" My first lochae, a small leafed red stemmed form, was a great disappointment. I waited five years for it to flower, and the three flowered trusses were sparsely scattered over a rather rangey bush. Each new flush of foliage was quickly overtaken by rust.
I thought it a pity that our only native species of Vireya made such a poor showing here on the North Coast when so many of its hybrids such as 'Lomac', 'Coral Flare', 'Tropic Fanfare' etc.are hardy and floriferous.

The next specimen that came my way had a much bigger leaf, also with a deep red stem and was also somewhat leggy and shy flowering. This had just about decided me not to bother with lochae again when I was given a plant from Thornton Peak. It seemed so different from the others that I felt there must be some mistake, the much shorter stalks had no hint of red and the scales on the leaves were much denser. The flowers are quite big, with a wonderful waxy sheen. Quite often there are three buds on one stalk so that when they open together they give the appearance of a very large truss. So far I have two flowerings a year.

I have heard that lochae flowers well in Victoria, I would be interested to hear of other growers' experience. "

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This is a subject that still needs some more comments from readers, despite the number of references made to it in the past.
So far R.lochae has been found in ten locations, viz: Mt.Bellenden Ker, Mt. Bartle Frere, Thornton Peak, Mt. Finnegan, Bells Peak, Mt.Peter Botti, Devil's Thumb, Mt. Spurgeon, Windsor Tablelands, and Mt.Lewis. It may yet be found on any other peaks over 1000m. One valuable account by Donald Teese of its occurrence on Thornton Peak appeared in the Australian Rhododendron Society quarterly journal of Sept. 1983. There it was growing between and over the rocks but was not growing epiphytically anywhere. There was a noticeable variegation in leaf size and shape - probably due to differences in exposure, soil, and seedling variation. Later in the article he commented also on the variation in flower colour from pale red to deep scarlet.

On this expedition the party also climbed Devil's Thumb, a large rock behind Mossman, where they also found R.lochae at 1100m although it had not previously reported in this locality. It is interesting that the plants here seemed to have larger and rounder leaves than those at Thornton Peak. I was later informed that this form of R.lochae also had the the biggest flowers of all, and had red stems.

Since each occurence of R.lochae on the separate mountain peaks is likely to have developed a little differently from other locations because of the normal slight variation between seedlings, it is not surprising that we have differences in flower, leaf, stem and growth habit. But how may we differentiate between the various sources of these plants to select the best ?

Mrs Saperstein has at least started the ball rolling - now we know that the Thornton Peak form has green stalks,denser scales, and large flowers. The Devil's thumb form has red stalks and large flowers, and the plant that I have from the Windsor tablelands, which has not yet flowered, has red stalks which turn green with maturity.

Previous articles in this newsletter - in the Introduction and in issues numbers 1 and 3 - have had comments on their natural growing conditions and their growing requirements. There is also an instructive note on 'Growing Rhododendron lochae' by Mr. H.M. Hewett of Mt. Kuringai, N.S.W. in the newsletter (Vol 17 No.2, April 1982) of the Society for Growing Native Plants, N.S.W. region. Mr Hewett described the plant's native habitat, root system,propagation by cutting etc. and then detailed how his plant was grown in approx. 600mm of sandstone ballast with a maximum dimension of 120mm. The stones were heavily interspersed with Casuarina mulch and the bed was located on the Southern edge of an elevated rockery in the sparse shade of a eucalypt. He fertilized with 3-month Osmocote several times yearly and commented that January saw it at its peak flowering period with about 50 trusses of 5 to 6 flowers -"but it is more than two years since the plant was completely devoid of flowers". That is certainly a record for any Vireya!

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In issue #4 there was a reference by Mark Vowles to the Nambour Garden Show, when 'Rosie Posie' was featured, showing its unusual petalloid flowers. He commented that this vireya might be a first step towards developing a double flower.

Double flowers were produced once only in the Veitch nursery more than a hundred years ago, when a group of semi-double and double flowered Vireyas were raised and named 'Balsamaeflora' after the double flowers of some balsams. This was achieved when a single flower in a truss was seen to have one anther and only one anther slightly petalloid.
The pistil of this flower was impregnated with pollen from the other anthers of the same flower and some twenty seedlings were raised from this self fertilization. There was considerable variation between these in form and also in colour, from white and pink to dark red and crimson, as well as pure yellow and various shades of orange.
The name of the original parent plant is not known but it is thought to have been one of a group with the parentage (R.jasminiflorum x R.javanicum) x R.brookeanum var gracile,i.e. a white with a red-orange and a yellow.

So, if you have a plant with a petalloid flower, try selfing it- you could be fortunate and a double flower would be a real winner!

In addition to petalloid flowers occasionally there occurs a many petalled variety, as if two flowers had been joined, so that the flower has ten petals and not the usual five. I have seen this on R.lochae and now Eric Jordan has had this happen to a flower of 'Sunny'. He has selfed this and obtained seed which has been sown and germinated. Maybe in a few years we shall know what has happened.

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A History of the Introduction of Vireya Rhododendron Species into Cultivation in Australian

As forecast in issue #4 Dr. R.M.Wither's account of this history was published in the Australian Rhododendron Soeiety's annual journal for 1991.
Including R.lochae there are a total of 121 species listed,these include a few varieties and some named forms of species. The first species from overseas, R.javanicum var.javanicum came to Australia as seed in 1956 - Messrs Veitch and Sons'nursery had obtained seed of this species in 1845, but it was a hot house plant in England then. We have certainly come a very long way since then and there are still more species to come. R.baenitzianum and R.hellwigii are just starting to become known and R.solitarium, although brought into Australia on three occasions, has not survived. Nor has R.searleanum but if you know of it growing in Australia, Lou Searle would be delighted to hear of it.

Dr. Withers' account is long and detailed but it is indeed a very interesting story and one well worth reading.

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From Lou Searle of R.M.B.38, Bellengry Road, Morton Creek, 2446.

Lou writes: " I have had trouble with leaves dying back from the tip, making the plants most unsightly. I first noticed this in the dry period in the first half of this year (1991). We had rain in June which freshened up the plants, but the leaf dieback continued throughout the second drought.

I sent specimens down to the Dept. of Agriculture in Sydney in August but had no answer until October 21st. when I received a letter from Mr. Gordon Stovold of the Biological and Chemical Research Institude at Rydalmere. This letter informed me that several fungi associated with the leaf death had been identified. Two of those identified, viz. Pestalotiopsis sp. and Phomopsis sp. are commonly associated with injured tissue but are not considered responsible for disease. They are often present on rhododendron leaves that have been sunburnt or show symptons of dry conditions. The third fungus is as yet unidentified.

A follow up letter on Oct.28th. informed me that the third fungus had been identified as Guignardia sp. This one is the most likely cause of the symptons as it is a recognised pathogen of a range of native and introduced species. The letter went on to say that little was known about the life cycle of Guignardia but that it is likely for the infection to have been made before the signs became apparent, and so it is difficult to develop a strategic spraying programme. Complete protection may be possible only by whole year spraying. Benlate is reputed to provide control of Guignardia in other hosts. Ideally a mixture of Benlate and Mancozeb or Chlorothalonil (Bravo) should be applied on a regular schedule.

I sometimes wonder if it is worth the effort! However I do feel that a lot of this infection may have been caused by the effects of the drought. The plants still in pots are watered by hand held hose and I do not think any of them are affected. Those planted out which are affected are most unsightly. I cannot afford the water to put sprinklers on, so when I see a plant wilting

I bucket water it and use a wetting agent, Rhone Paulene X77, to make sure the water gets straight down. The ground is so dry that despite the wood chip mulch, undoctored water just flows off the surface."

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So just when it seemed that the only fungal problems were phytophthora and other root rotting fungi, powdery mildew, rust and petal blight, we have a new one to think about.

While the drought may have been behind Lou's trouble as he has no reticulated water supply, it brought some relief in Wollongong from our usual springtime attacks of petal blight, there was none on either azaleas or vireyas. Others were not so fortunate. Eric Jordan of Oakville 2765 tells that he had some vireyas affected with petal blight that did not clear up with the usual spraying of Bayleton. On advice he used Mancozeb with success, but the advice was also to revert to Bayleton next time. It seems a good idea to alternate sprays for fungal diseases, in general.

Also in regard to Mancozeb a note in the A.R.S. Victorian Branch newsletter last year recommended that Mancozeb plus Sulphur be used to combat powdery mildew on vireyas. It was stressed that the sulphur addition was important. Hortico and Yates both have this mixture on the market and advise that it is a preventative and not a cure so that it should be used at the first sign of trouble. It is unfortunate that that the sulphur remains on the leaves as a rather unsightly deposit, but that does pass with time unlike the distorted and discoloured leaves that the mildew bequeaths.

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You may have wondered on occasion just how people have chosen the various names that have been used to register Vireya hybrids. Some are fairly obvious like 'Donald Stanton' after a person, 'Penrice' after a small town, Arthur's Choice' for a preferred seedling, 'Pink Seedling' from its appearance and so on. But others are not so easy. I was therefore intrigued recently to be informed by Amelia Martin, our youngest granddaughter who reads prolifically, not only children's books but also 'Vireya Rhododeodrons' that she knew where the names of some of the Vireyas had originated - specifically some of those registered by Mr.W. Moynier. He has grown and registered most of the hybrids made by Mr.Pete Sullivan. Some of these were first named by Pete, usually after Saints and Martyrs, when he was active with Vireyas at Strybing Arboretum, San Francisco, but some other names had no obvious source.

But now I know! If you read that intriguing series of childrens' books by C.S.Lewis, which I have just now read, you too wil have access to the land of 'NARNIA',wheretwo of the cities are 'TASHBAAN' and 'CAIR PARAVEL', where 'TEREBINTHIA' is an island. 'MT.PIRE" is in a far off country, 'ARAVIR' is the evening star, 'SHASTA' is a boy, MOOWOOD is the Hare, BELISAR is a Lord of Narnia and CALAVAR is a province of the country. RAVALAC is just Calavar spelt backwards.

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From current publications there are some relevant items of interest:

The American Rhododendron Society has an article in its journal (No.4, 1991) by J.L.Rouse,E.C.Williams,and R.B.Knox a well illustrated article on the flowering of an unusual hybrid - 'Arthur's Choice x R.ovatum, a Vireya crossed with an evergreen azalea.

I am indebted to Dr.John Rouse for a copy of a very detailed and interesting article entitled'Reproductive timetable for the tropical Vireya rhododendron, R.macgregoriae',by E.G.Williams,J.L.Rouse, V.Kaul,and R.B.Knox, which has been printed in 'Sexual Plant Reproduction'. This article details the processes and the period of each phase of seed production from the opening of the flower, the ripening of the pollen, the receptiveness of the stigma, fertilization, the formation of seed and its ripening. An invaluable guide for those concerned with raising seed. Copies may possibly be available from Professor R.B.Knox, Melbourne University.

'Australian Horticulture'has had a number of references to nitrogen 'drawdown' in potting mixes where the decomposition of organic materials (bark,sawdust etc.) can absorb the available nitrogen in the mix at the expense of the plant. They have certainly confirmed the advisability of adding slow release fertilizers to potting mixes. I had been wary of this, thinking that there could be a build up of fertilizer released in the unused mix if not used promptly. However it is obvious now that if the mix is moist and and warm enough for fertizer to be released then there will be a need for nitrogen.
There is also a well illustrated article on Vireyas that has benefited from Graham Snell's fine photography. Perhaps we shall be able to rewrite some of the recommended practices in the future with more experience but it is difficult to write more than a very general article for the wide range of climate in which Vireyas will grow in Australia. However the comment on the poisonous nature of Vireyas might better have been omitted as the only specific reference on research was to a book in which the author states that he suffered temporary loss of vision after rubbing his eyes soon after touching the flower. I do not know of this book and would certainly like to read it. I would make it clear that Graham Snell did not write this article, by the way.
There have been two conclusive and undisputed articles by David G. Leach on the toxicity of Asiatic rhododendrons,viz:'The Two Thousand Year Curse of the Rhododendron' in 'Rhododendron Information' 1967, by the American Rhododendron Association, and 'The Ancient Curse revisited' in 'The Rhododendron' March 1982,by the Australian Rhododendron Society. These are sufficient to arouse suspicion of Vireyas, and that was confirmed when visiting the Herbarium at Lae Botanic Garden in 1981. Here we were specifically warned by Mr.E.Henty of the Dept.of Forests ,Papua New Guinea by the entry in Botany Bulletin No.12,'Harmful Plants in Papua New Guinea',by E.E.Henty. He writes,inter alia,"Rhododendron macgregoriae .... Its toxicity is well known to local people in the Western Highlands who prepare rat-baits by mixing parts of the plant with cooked sweet potato; the flowers are considered particularly poisonous.. Human deaths are recorded. It is probable that many of the several hundred other species of Rhododendon native to Papua New Guinea, are toxic."
My own minor experience is recorded in the A.R.S.'The Rhododendron' of December 1982.
It is not wise to ignore these warnings nor to suggest that people would not therefore grow Vireyas. There are many other poisonous plants that are dangerous in their different ways.

PINK SEEDLING x	
aurigeranum	Penrice
PRINCESS ALEXANDRA x	
laetum	Tropic Tango
PRINCESS ROYAL x	
jasminiflorum	Princess Alexandra
PAUCIFLORUM x	
lochae	Littlest Angel
RETUSUM x	
(aurigeranum x lochae)	Clarion Firm
RUBINEIFLORUM x	
macgregoriae (yellow)	Sweet Beatrice
STENOPHYLLUM x	
commonae	Josephine Gordon
SAXAFRAGOIDES x	
womerslyii	Rogue Red
SOUVENIR de J.H.MANGLES x	
laetum	Vladimir Bukovsky
SIR GEORGE HOLFORD x LEUCOGIGAS) x	
aurigeranum	Tashbaan
TROPIC GLOW x	
(lochae x macgregoriae)	Brightly
(lochae x macgregoriae)	Kisses
TAYLORI x	
leptanthum	Tiffany Rose
TRIUMPHANS x	
laetum	Scarlet Beauty
TRIUMPHANS x JAVANICUM) x	
leucogigas	Cair Paravel
leucogigas	Hari's Choice
leucogigas	Marshall Pierce Madison
WOMERSLYII x	
saxafragoides	Rogue Red

ZOELLERI x	
aurigeranum	Gilded Sunrise
Clorinda	Cyprian
konori	Calavar
konori	Pink Pazazz
konori	Ravalac
laetum	George Budgen
laetum	Simbu Sunset
laetum	Tropic Glow
(lochae x javanicum)	Red Rooster
phaeopeplum	Dr Herman Sleumer
(phaeopeplum x lochae)	Fire Plum
ZOELLERI x LEUCOGIGAS) x	
(laetum x zoelleri)	Anatta Gold
(laetum x zoelleri)	Sunset Fantasy
ZOELLERI x JAVANICUM x	
Dr Herman Sleumer	Emmanuel
ZOELLERI x LOCHAE x	
konori	Robert Bates
ZOELLERI x LOCHAE) x ZOELLERI]	
(zoelleri x lochae)	Thomas Becket