

R Zolleri. Island Sunset.

THE VIREYA VENTURE No.12 JULY 1993

Winter opened very kindly in Wollongong with 27mm of rain on the first day of June. Since there had been only 16.5mm in April and 20.5mm in May this was really appreciated. Alas there has been no more since then and the position worsened when cold, dry westerly winds arrived at full strength on the 12th. and although they have slackened off, are still making conditions cold and dry.

As a consequence of this and possibly as a sequel to our very high temperatures in February, a number of my vireyas suffered. This aroused a fresh interest in soil wetting agents whose use may prevent further losses in heavy soil, but time will tell.

References to Vireyas in general gardening notes have been uncommon (if there have been any at all?) so Shirley Stackhouse'casual reference to a mixed planting of shrubs in her garden which included vireya rhododendrons was a pleasant surprise in the S.M.H. of June 22nd. We need a lot more comments on their use to see them given due acknowledgement.

More displays in public gardens are also long overdue, to let people see well grown mature plants and not just the isolated flower or two in a nursery. Fortunately Sydney Botanic Garden's display recently was showing some very respectable plants in flower and more plantings coming on well, an improvement on last year's good showing. Nearer home it was an even better show on display in the A.R.S. Illawarra Branch Rhododendron Park at their June meeting - the best that I have seen there.

Remember the address for your answers - or queries ?

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J.Clyde Smith, Editor.

Propagating Vireyas from Seed

From John L.Rouse, Melbourne, 10th April 1993

Pollination and the production of seeds is the primary way vireyas propagate in their natural tropical habitat, but under cultivation by horticulturalists, both amateur and professional, vegetative propagation is frequently preferred for species and is essential for cloning hybrids. Manual pollination of vireyas is, however, important, not only for the production of new, hopefully superior hybrids but also for the propagation of species by self- or intra specific pollinations. Individual members of a species vary, and sexual propagation produces seedlings with diverse qualities allowing the selection of plants with desirable characteristics for cultivation in the temperate climates of southern Australia. As well, some highly desirable species such as R.konori and R.leucogigas are difficult to propagate from cuttings because of the lack of suitable cutting material. Here, I report some recent pollinations and ones in preparation.

In May, 1992, Lyn Craven sent me pollen of R.konori 'White Giant' a form with exceptionally large flowers. Some of this pollen was dried at +4°C and stored at -20°C and the remainder was used to make the pollination R.hellwigii x R.konori. As a control, the same cross was made using pollen from my prefered form of R.Konori from Irian Jaya. The seed was harvested in February this year, and mostly sent to the Seed Exchanges of the Australian Rhododendron Society (Jack O'Shannassy) and the American Rhododendron Society (Bill Moyles) for further distribution. The seed I sowed myself germinated well and the seedlings are now 2-3 mm tall and just showing their first true leaf.

R.konori 'White Giant' (on loan from Lyn) shows no inclination to produce flower buds, so while waiting until I can self it and hopefully produce an abundance of little 'White Giants', I planned to make the cross R.konori (Irian Jaya form) x R.konori 'White Giant' using the stored pollen. However, recently I noticed that one of the R.leucogigas in my greenhouse has two flower buds developing so this may modify my plans. The R.leucogigas came as seed from Bob Withers in March 1975 as R.gardenia aff.selfed. I found the seedlings lacked vigour, were difficult to maintain and the plant in bud was taken as a cutting from one of the seedlings for rooting in September 1979. It showed more vigour than the seedlings and is now in a 200mm pot and over a metre tall. the seedlings are mostly, if not all, dead. I plan to self this plant now known as R.leucogigas 'Hunstein's Secret' with the aim of obtaining more robust seedlings than before, and also to cross it with R.konori 'White Giant'. Before looking to see if I had sufficient pollen in store for both crosses, I wondered which cross had preference if there was only enough for one of them. Being unable to make up my mind, I examined the pollen. There is just enough for both, so I can proceed without further thought.

I expect there will be some spare flowers to pollinate on R.leucogigas 'Hunstein's Secret'. This will need planning in advance so there is pollen on hand. I think I favour an R.konori or R.leucogigas hybrid, which doesn't seem particularly original. If some one has a better idea and can supply the pollen, let me know.

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Note: R.leucogigas hs been used in some 31 registered hybrids plus a few still to come, but of these only 7 were primary crosses with other species. 'Hunstein's Secret' has been crossed with R.lochae twice and with R.zoelleri, while other forms of R.leucogigas have been crossed with R.laetum, R.konori, R.aurigeranum and R.zoelleri. The other crosses were more complex as, for example, 'Anatta Gold' which is (R.laetum x R.zoelleri) x (R.zoelleri x R.Leucogigas).

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Mrs Sylvia Saperstein, Main Arm, Mullumbimby, N.S.W.2482, writes:
Three years ago I was sent a cutting of R.konori x R.hellwigii. It has just flowered for the first time. The foliage has a lovely smooth gloss, showing the influence of R.hellwigii. The flowers are nearly as large as R.konori and just as scented, but the petals are much rounder and have two or three quite large extra petals joined to sterile anthers. These extra petals are smooth and gently curved inward. The colour is almost white with a frosty pink around the petal margin. When I was in Melbourne doing the rounds of the vireya buffs most of them had recently acquired sister seedlings of my plant from John Rouse, so quite a number of growers must be seeing them flower this autumn.

I would be very interested to compare notes on these pages, if other growers have as lovely a plant as I have. I am sure some-one will want to name it.The days of naming every attractive seedling are numbered, I should think, and this newsletter might be a good forum to prevent a lot of duplication.

In April this year all the flowers on 'Pink Delight','Souvenir de J.H.Mangles' and R.javanicum were split. Once I read in the New Zealand 'Vireya News' that splitting could be the result of cold, dark weather. That was certainly not the case here,but it did coincide with an aerial spray of phosphoric acid against phytophthora. In May the flowers were the normal size again. Has anyone any ideas?

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Note: The question of what to register may be difficult because of the distances separating people who cannot compare their plant with anyone else - but do feel free to use this newsletter to do so. We may have some duplication but this is better than not having named plants registered. Even if their parentage is uncertain they can be described in full and their name recorded by registration and duplication may be avoided. Sighting of the plant is no longer a condition of registration.

R.rubineiflorum

From Brian Clancy, Bentleigh, Victoria.

(Further to our last issue, on returning from Melbourne, I found that one of the vireyas that I had purchased had no label, so I checked with Brian, who has advised me that:)

The dwarf vireya you bought from my daughter Geraldine Roelink, is definitely 'Sunny' x R.rubineiflorum.
In October 1987, I made two crosses using pollen from the R.rubineiflorum collected by Canon Cruttwell above 2,500 metres on Mt.Michael and given to the Australian Rhododendron Society in September 1981. The other cross was with a R.laetum x R.aurigeranum hybrid. When I first showed these compact dwarf hybrids at a Victorian Branch Monthly meeting, one expert member was quite outspoken and adamant that the crosses could not be made because of the disparate length of the styles. However there is no doubt that the crosses with R.rubineiflorum have been achieved and have resulted in very compact dwarf hybrids.

R.rubineiflorum is the smallest rhododendron in the world! It is very prostrate and has surprisingly large ruby red flowers. Two-year old cutting grown plants of the species are not yet two centimetres high. The new vireya species of R.rubineiflorum was initially described and illustrated by Lyn Craven in the 'Notes from the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh', Vol.38, No.1, pages 141-144, 1980. This description is based on plants grown from cutting material collected by the late Don Stanton and Lou Searle in 1972.

Most of the R.rubineiflorum hybrids are stoloniferous and when I mentioned our discussion at Nunawading, Geraldine showed me a plant of 'Sunny" x R.rubineiflorum growing in a 15cm pot with seven main stems and 14 stolons breaking from the base. Flowering at present is a four year old plant of the R.laetum x R.aurigeranum cross, 16cm high and 28cm across with seventy -eight flower buds. The tangerine coloured flowers are slightly larger than a ten cent piece and the small plant puts on an attractive display for two to three months.

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Siblings

Also, a little later, from Brian:
As reported in Vireya Venture No.11, March 1993, Ross MacDonald of Foothills Nursery, quoted 'Arthur's Choice' and 'Buttermilk' as hybrids that are showing variation possibly because they have come from siblings and not from the original plant that was registered. In addition some Victorian Branch members claim that there are six different plants trading under the 'Bold Janus' label.

The facts concerning 'Arthur's Choice' are as follow. It is a second generation (F2) hybrid of R.christianae x R.lochiae produced from selfing the best of the first generation seedlings. Only eight F2 seedlings were grown to flowering size.

Seven of these were a distinct improvement on both parental species. The late Arthur Headlam wanted me to name three of these. I tentatively named two: Arthur's selection as 'Arthur's Choice' and my selection as 'Overflow'. Subsequently, 'Arthur's Choice' was registered at the request of the Registrar, Edinburgh. 'Overflow' and the other siblings are still in my possession excepting for one which I planted 1.5metres high on a living tree-fern at Olinda. This plant has been growing and flowering for twenty years through hail, frost and snow, virtually without any attention excepting for unauthorised pruning by 'light fingers' when it is in bloom.

'Arthur's Choice' has been acknowledged, both in Australia and Overseas as being very good. In the journal of the American Rhododendron Society, Fall 1991, Dr John Rouse wrote that 'Arthur's Choice' is horticulturally an improvement on both its parental species. It is a delightfully showy. floriferous hybrid and has leaves that are larger, greener and more leathery. This fame has resulted in imitations trading under the 'Arthur's Choice' label. Al of these are first generation hybrids and compare unfavourably with the second generation 'Arthur's Choice'.

Vireya growers should always attempt to get the best. Inferior sorts take just as much attention but do not give the ultimate satisfaction. The 'real' Arthur's Choice' is one of the best vireya hybrids. It is very floriferous and is easy to grow and flower.

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At our May 20th Branch meeting Geraldine got the best of the night with a 33-flower truss of (R.laetum x R.zoelleri) x R.brookeanum. I got the second best of the night with a 2 year old plant of Dr.Sleumer x R.superbum. This is the first of the R.superbum hybrids to flower and it is very good. The 12-flower truss was akin to R.superbum. It had been out two weeks and when first out it had a magnificent scent.

During May and June this year I flowered the first two plants of Dr.Sleumer x R.superbum. The plants were just two years old; the cuttings being put down in March 91. The plants were just about 46cm high. The first to flower in May had a magnificent truss of 12 flowers 24cm acros with a very rich carnation scent (probably the best that I've experienced). The individual flowers were 11cm across with mostly five petals and a few with six petals, all reflexed similarly to R.superebum. The creamy white flowers were edged lavender pink and were most attractive. The rich scent lasted two weeks but then disappeared in the cold weather. The flower, truss and scent were so good that it would be difficult to improve with further hybridising.

The second R.superbum hybrid to flower had a nine flower truss in a deep pink colour with a yellow star-like throat. The individual flowers were 10cm across with mainly seven petals. The plant bloomed during very cold weather when the maximum temperature reached 15° and had no discernible scent but would have to be given a very high rating. I have attempted to back-cross three of the flowers with R.superbum pollen in cold weather

As the name implies R.superbum is a spectacular and highly scented rhododendron and would have to be given a five star rating. Its only drawback in my opinion is that it can take up to 15 years to flower. However the the first two hybrids to flower indicate that it will prove to be a very good parent; producing very good attractive flowers on small two year old plants. I have a number of the reverse cross yet to flower and experience has shown that the results will be similar regardless of which way the cross is made.

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Note: R.superbum has not received much notice in the past, surprisingly, as it is a very prominent epiphyte in P.N.G., where it also grows terrestrially. To date none of its hybrids have been registered but they sound most promising.

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Potting mixes

The booklet,'Potting Mixes, and the care of plants growing in them' by Kevin Handreck was published by the CSIRO as No.9 in their series 'Discovering Soils', in 1985. It is still available and has some invaluable information on potting mixes. One item refers to the measure of air filled porosity of a mix, a very important factor in the successful growing of vireyas.

Now Mr Handreck has taken this a step further in the April-May issue of 'Australian Horticulture' with an article relating this to container height. His method of measuring the porosity of the mix is rather more professional than the booklet but has the same principle. What it adds is the relation between height and porosity, thus a container of mix'A' with a height of 25cm has a porosity of 28% but the same mix in a 6cm heigh container has a porosity of only 11%. Similarly mix 'B' with a porosity of 5% at 6cm has 15% porosity at a height of 25cm. Which gives weight to the use of deep containers where possible for vireyas.

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The Spring issue (Vol47 No.2) of the American Rhododendron Society has a number of short articles on vireyas and some comments that indicate the difference that climate can make to the flowering performance - e.g. Richard Cavender of Sherwood Oregon, rightly praises R.christi for its striking flowers but also because it "blooms young". My rather skinny plants are not young, nor have they flowered yet. Is this common here?

It was interesting to see that Richard Chaikin (Cape Cod Vireyas) has a photo of Mrs Ruth Funder's garden at Kew, Victoria, to illustrate his article. Also his comments that a magnesium deficiency causes red spots while yellow leaves may be chlorotic or may arise from a calcium deficiency. Here, red spots on R.lochae were once attributed to cold weather, but have not been appearing for some time, except as an obvious indication of powdery mildew, This, of course, is just what Mrs Saperstein told us in issue No.9 of Oct.92, that magnesium deficiency will cause red spots.

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