

THE VIREYA VENTURE No.31 APRIL 1998

Last month a request was sent to a small number of people living in different climatic areas of Australia for their comments on a number of questions concerning the growing of Vireyas.

I was very pleased with the response that was given and grateful not just for the replies to the questions but also for letters detailing specific problems. One such letter from Miss Mary Jackson heads this issue, it not only describes her garden but it also details the Brisbane climate this year and its effect, which is very much the same as it was here - Sydney had the hottest three months of the years on record and April began just as badly.

Fortunately we had 46mm of rain and some cool weather to start Easter but did not suffer the Sydney floods where they had some six or seven times as much rain as here at Keiraville.

Here is a new subject for the future? A note from the March newsletter of the Hawaii chapter of the American Rhododendron Society, "The Internet and Us"... Your Editor has been struggling to put up his own Web Page to publish some of the things in which he has an interest. By the time you receive this he hopes you will be able to read this newsletter plus other Vireya information on his address: http://www.aloha.net/-iiwi
One of the items is Bovees Nursery, the largest Vireya source in the country. You will really enjoy reaching White and Lucie Smith at: http://www.teleport.com/-bovees/home.html

There is a new Australian book - 'Growing Rhododendrons' by Richard Francis, with a section on Vireyas, available from Simon and Schuster Australia, PO Box 507 East Roseville N.S.W.2069.

Your comments and enquiries will be of interest to all - send them to :- The Editor, PO Box 8, Keiraville, N.S.W. 2500.

J.Clyde Smith

From: Miss Mary Jackson

Indooroopilly, 4068
BRISBANE. Q.

I have been asked for some comments about my experience with vireyas in Brisbane, but would hasten to point out that experience does not equate with expertise. I am not, and never will be, a gardener, my involvement with horticulture up to my retirement a few years ago being limited to maintenance of a few indoor potplants in a small flat, and admiration of gardens created by others. To be truthful, I do not even like gardening which, to me, is just a word for constant hayfever, hard labour, sweating, and aching joints. Indeed, one of my earliest actions after my return to my Brisbane home and its established garden was to hire a helpful young man to take over the gardening for me.

So how, you may well ask (as I myself have on numerous occasions), did I get myself into the infuriating, frustrating, and incomprehensible mess of trying to grow vireyas? The plain and simple answer is - by accident. At a weekend market, I skidded to a halt before three potted plants with glorious flowers - 1 yellow, 1 red, and 1 gold/orange. In my ignorance and naivete, I just saw something I liked and didn't even think about checking on its suitability for either Brisbane's climate or cultivation by a non-gardener. I simply bought the yellow one (on the basis that that was the best colour for the corner where I planned to put it), in the course of which I was told it was a vireya - the word "rhododendron", which might have rung some warning bells even for me, was not mentioned. It was several weeks later that I discovered its origins and that it had its own name of "Wattlebird", by which time I'd compounded my troubles by deliberately visiting nurseries etc. to get more. Without realising it, I was well and truly hooked and still am, though my amateur status remains unchanged.

Over the past few years I have purchased a lot of vireyas, which have been kept in elevated garden beds, terracotta pots, and hanging baskets. Overall, I have lost a lot more than I've saved, particularly in the early stages when I tried to save money by buying small newly-struck plants which proved to be more vulnerable to Brisbane's humid heat than the further advanced plants. Even these latter plants dislike our local climate, and the excessive heat and humidity of the 1997/98 summer made considerable inroads into my collection. Some wilting plants reacted fairly well to extra water or movement

to a shadier or cooler place, but very few escaped some adverse effects. Another factor which seems to have had a bearing on my losses is that many of the plants that died were earlier hybrids originating in the Southern States which presumably prefer a more temperate climate, although some Southern hybrids have not been so affected.

In the earlier days, I think I also lost some plants because of over-fertilization, particularly of those in pots or baskets. For the past two years, I have followed a pattern of 1 teaspoonful of long-term Osmocote (per med.-sized pot) in Spring and about the same quantity of blood & bone in autumn with a minimal supplement of Osmocote. Because Brisbane water is very alkaline it can cause a lightening of the green in foliage for some vireyas and, when this happens, I've used a weak solution of Sulphate of Iron (1 teasp.to a bucket of water) to spray the plants. I have also occasionally used a small application of epsom salts to combat magnesium deficiency indicated by dark spots on foliage, and a small quantity of Sulphate of Potash pellets to stimulate flowering, but I've learnt to be fairly cautious in using any of these.

Occasionally, I've done some pruning in the hope of reviving a distressed plant and, where this has been kept to tip pruning in the early stages of trouble, I've been fairly successful in extending the plant's life, although not always indefinitely. However, I've had no success at all when desperation has driven me to try more severe pruning on plants which seem determined to die. On the other hand, my one venture into drastic pruning of a plant ("Our Marcia") which was leggy to the point of ridicule was very rewarding in its encouragement of lower bushiness, mainly, I think, because the plant was actually quite healthy and there existed some vestigial buds at the base of the two long branches.

Overall, I've learnt that there are always exceptions to any generalisation I've tried to make about vireyas, at least here. At times, I've tried the same plant in the three forms of containment - ground, pot and basket - hoping to find which brings the best results. Only a few, e.g."Fireplum", seem happy in all situations. Very few plants in the ground have died, but not all these have flowered well; quite a number in pots and baskets have survived and flowered well, but others will not survive here for long even when different garden positions and containers are tried. Even different plants of the same

name can vary in their reactions to similar treatment, though the size and strength of each plant has some bearing on this. About the only generalisation I'd have any confidence in making is that all vireyas react positively to good air circulation in Brisbane conditions, even if their long-term prospects of survival are poor. If asked to identify some of the plants which seem to have adjusted better than others to Brisbane's climate in my garden, I'd say "Loranthiflorum"; "Fireplum"; "Popcorn"; "Arthur's Choice"; "Clare Rouse"; "Craig Faragher"; "Gossamer Pink"; "Haloed Gold"; "Ivory Coast"; "Kisses"; "Lomac"; "Nancy Miller Adler"; "Orange Wax"; "Pacific Shower"; "Penrice"; "Princess Alexandra"; "Rosie Posie"; "Sarah Louise"; "Sunny"; "Toff"; and an unnamed "Lochae"/ "Loranthiflorum" hybrid.

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RHODODENDRON ROUSEI

"A BEAUTIFUL NEW SPECIES FROM THE PHILIPPINES"

This new species of Vireya is described by George Argent and Domingo Madulid in the latest issue of 'The New Plantsman' where it is very pleasing to see "Named in honour of Dr.John Rouse of Melbourne for his outstanding contribution to our knowledge of Rhododendrons of section Vireya".

This new species has been described from recent collections made from Sibuyan Island in the Philippines, and it is illustrated with fine drawings and photos. The flowers, on a shrub to 1metre, are pure white of strong texture, 22-28mm x 45-57mm with 5 petals and 10 stamens. They last well, almost always in flower but have no scent, as does R.vidalli ..... it was first collected by George Argent in August 1989 when it was identified as R.vidalli, but during a later expedition to the Philippines in 1997 the authors saw a true R,vidalli in flower and discovered that the plant with the latter name, which they had been growing in Edinburgh and other places was not the same.

R.rousei has broader leaves of a much darker lustrous green and the flowers of the true R.vidalli are smaller and more delicate in texture, with lobes up to 13mm compared with 24 - 27mm of R.rousei.

It is interesting to read that this species grows on peculiar soils which often have high levels of heavy metals poisonous to plants not adapted to them - but they thrive in the Edinburgh Green House with normal mixtures.

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SPLIT FLOWERS

A question from R.Wadham, Lenswood, South Aust.that you may be able to solve.

Early last year a large potted plant of 'Irian Jaya' put on a spectacular flowering display which lasted for weeks. This year when the buds started to swell I brought the plant inside the house in a well lighted condition. Every flower opened with split corollas resulting in a shredded mess. It was put outside and about a month later several late flowers opened perfectly with no sign of splitting. Several other hybrids, including a large flowered R.leucogigas x R.Lochiae cross and recent popular introductions, have also had split flowers.

The only mention of this problem that I have seen is in the J.Kenyon and J.Walker book on Vireyas. If the cause is climatic or a cultural malpractice it would be desirable to get some consensus on this. The Adelaide climate is Mediterranean with temperatures in summer often reaching the high thirties (°C), but here in the Hills the night temperature is cool. If, however the cause is genetic then this should not be ignored as an'Irian Jaya' experience does nothing for the public image of Vireyas.

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From Mrs Sheila Porter, 39 Beecroft Rd. Beecroft, N.S.W.2119

My apologies for the delay in answering your letter but six weeks ago I broke my right arm and being totally right handed, some things have been difficult to execute, including writing with my arm in plaster. That was removed earlier this week.

Because of other medical problems during recent years my Vireyas were struggling. Last January the fifty odd I grow in pots were repotted, mulched with lucerne hay, watered in with seasol and placed on a ten inch high stand, constructed of metal reinforcing mesh covered with double weed mat lashed to the mesh. Previously the potted plants were sitting on very flat bare ground with poor drainage and after heavy watering or rain (when it used to fall) were of course subject to problems. Within a month all were looking healthier and soon putting on new growth.

The new stand runs along the Eastern side of a North/South shade house, open to the East, protected to the North and West by a tree canopy and shrubs on higher ground. The shadehouse is ten feet high covered by reinforcing mesh and 70% black shade cloth, where dozens of potted epiphytes hang. A sprinkler system runs down the centre of the shadehouse with spaced 360° light sprays.

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From Mrs M.Carver, Woodbridge, Tasmania 7162:-

"In Woodbridge a normal summer is one that gives us a reasonable amount of rain and showers to keep the garden going. Of course we have to water with a hose as well, but this year there was no rain after the first week in December until 8th February. We had 2ml,3ml,5m, too little after scorching hot days in the 26°-29°C and the odd day of over 30°C including 39.5° one day. There has been a lot of strong wind too, which causes further drying. We got out the fire hose and gave the garden a thorough soaking once a week from our dam, and I am pleased to say that we lost few plants. Many looked dried and unwell after the very hot days and some lost a number of leaves.

Our clay soil has dried out and it is impossible to put a fork into it, so why do the weeds have no problem with pushing their way up? They are still growing.

Again this year we have had a problem with the native hens damaging the garden during their clumsy aggressive behaviour. There were upwards of 25 birds regularly dashing about, jumping on plants, digging out any small plants such as annuals or young seed-grown perennials before they could establish. We have now enclosed our property of nearly 3 acres, with chicken wire and excluded all these birds by various means, including rounding them up like sheep, with a lot of running around ourselves as we no longer have a dog, and shepherding them down a race to the creek!

I still have'nt planted out my Vireyas, mostly cutting grown and about which I have written in earlier VV's, but feel that they are quite enjoying life beneath the huge old crab apple tree, on old brick paving, where they get morning sun and afternoon shade. They were looking a little chlorotic in the Spring but a dose of Epsom salts, a mild dose of nitrogen followed up by seaweed fertiliser a couple of weeks later and they have come through the hot summer and look pretty good.

Two plants have had flowers and after reading the VV in January and the fact that some people had noticed the lack of pollen, I went out to look at my plants, but too late, the flowers had dropped and it was difficult to see if there had been pollen. Seed pods taken off and cut open looked empty, and the ones left on the plant soon dropped off..I have lost two older plants this summer which were in a different situation,from becoming too dry. They had very tiny shoots at the base of each stem so I cut the tops back, but it was too late, no sprouting took place and now the plants are quite dead.

It looks as though my young Vireyas are going to want to stay in their present position, which was only to be a temporary arrangement! They are doing so well under the Malus transitorias which may be an interesting contrast as the Vireyas develop and flower.

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GROWING VIREYAS

The questions that were sent out are listed with a variety of personal comments or group answers when there was general concensus, it is hoped that these will give some useful guidance.

1. Very tall leggy plants on single stems are frustrating. How do you get them to shoot from the base?

From Barry Paget,Capalaba West,Queensland. "I find that many of my tall leggy plants are now reshooting at lower levels along the stem. I feel that this is due to the increased sunlight penetrating the plants when they are not so crowded. I feel it is the sunlight which stimulates growth. I have also found that bending a stem over (to say 90°) will encourage new growth. This however has to be done very carefully, due to the risk of snappiny the stem.
From Lou Searle, Mortons Creek,N.S.W. "I have found that bending the leggy shoots over (hang a weight on them) and eventually a hedge of shoots appear. I have done this with R.laetum, Wattle Bird and others with success and have even been able to layer the end of the branch. Some time ago the plant which came to me as Narnia but is not - the younger of two in the garden - was flattened by a falling pine branch. I left it lying as it was. It is now a nice mini-hedge.

While agreeing with the above, Eric Jordan of Oakville, N.S.W. adds: "if there are two or more leggy stems,cut back, leaving one, and fertilise - this has been very succesful for me. Cincturing is another method. This involves pressing a sharp knife blade around the stem thus temporarily cutting off the flow of sap; fertilise at the same time. Sometime ago I had some plants with string tied labels - the string cut in and this had the effect of inducing shooting. It is not as good as the knife as the cut heals quickly.

2. A recent publication warned against the use of high potash in fertilisers for Vireyas. Do you have any preferences for fertilisers?

From Dr R.Withers,Donvale,Victoria. I am very hesitant about fertilising Vireyas - a little Osmocote at about half strength or half strength Aquasol is all I would use.
Mrs Sheila Porter,Beecroft, N.S.W. writes:"Have only ever used Blood and Bone to fertilise Vireyas. My recent repotting involved a light dressing of Blood and Bone before the mulch.
From Barry Paget:- So far as potassium fertilisers with Vireyas are concerned, I have found that the use of the new Osmocote. N:P:K: 10:4.5:15 has given excellent results. I wrote about this in a previous issue of VV. (Issue #26). I am finding that not only am I obtaining more blooms on my plants but they are blooming much earlier than ever - plants in 115 and 140 pots. The question of fertilising had caused me some concern as I had read that they do not like much fertiliser. In my ignorance I used Osmocote on my plants from day one, before I acquired the information and have had wonderful results. I apply a teaspoon of Osmocote per 140mm pot (heaped on 200mm pots and larger. This fertiliser is not available from the chain stores

in small packs, but is available in 25kg bags from the usual fertiliser outlets.
Eric Jordan writes: "I have carried out various trials with Aquasol,Organic Life and Healthy Earth, and found Aquasol very good, but not Organic Life as it can kill some species. Healthy Earth I Have used on some St.Valentines that were lanky, with no pruning the results were terrific, shoots everywhere."

3. Acid fertilisers were also not recommended but were not named. What are they?

There were no specific answers so my guess would have been to suspect most chlorides but some recent reading has also suggested aluminium sulphate, a soil acidifier, should be avoided as excess aluminium is toxic.
Mrs Porter has added:"Lime,poultry manure, mushroom compost and some horse manure (paddock O.K.) but stabled animals specially fed, I would regard as having toxic concentrates."

4. If you prune back a straggly plant to a bare stem - not a leaf anywhere - will it live?

Barry Paget's comment will fairly well summarise the answers on this, viz: "I do know that pruning plants back to bare stems will result in the the chances of reshooting being much reduced (this is from experience of old). I feel the plants need the energy of carbohydrates produced in the leaves adjacent to the cut to produce new growth. I made that mistake fourteen years ago - never again. Occasionally a plant will reshoot but it is not worth the risk."

5. Curl grubs are only occasionally seen but I once found six in one pot when repotting. They must eat roots?

It was a surprise to have such a unanimous decision - yes they do and can cause considerable damage. Yet the only reference in print to these as pests was a brief note that there was a black headed grub that affected lawns but there was nothing that could be done about it. They are the larvae of a number of beetles I believe - e.g. the vine weevil, the Christmas beetle,scarab beetle....Mrs Porter says:" You are lucky not to have many curl grubs, any plant that suddenly looks poorly demands root investigation,they feed on the young fibrous roots. Curl grubs are very prevalent where there are gum trees. We have lost many potted plants,camellias, azaleas, maples etc.and when turned out found curl grubs in the soil. Recently I have watered potted plants (not Vireyas) with Lawn Grub Kill or like, but at this time do not know how effective this has been.

I thought they were fairly rare when I sent out the questionaire but a few days after that I investigated a rotting six inch thick slab of tree trunk that I had a Vireya in a twelve inch pot sitting on. It fell to pieces and was largely sawdust with remnants of tunnelled wood, a home to one hundred and seven curl grubs - three of which were twice the normal size, a different breed. So now I wonder if some losses of plants in the ground may be due to them?.

Ernest Lord's book 'Shrubs and Trees for Australian Gardens' has a note on soil pests but only names nematodes. However his suggestion to use fumigants such a Carbon Bi-sulphide, Napthalene or insecticides to clear the soil of all kinds of insects is not difficult to adopt for pot grown plants. Napthalene is easy to use - a teaspoon near the bottom of a 200mm pot has been effective in keeping out worms, but I have not used it consistently and it would need reneming more often than the plant might need repotting.

6. Which are your best flowering species and hybrids?
Combining all the names listed is the easiest way to give the answers since there is little difference between locations. So, without doubt R.Zoelleri is the favourite species with little competition, and 'Simbu Sunset' certainly heads the hybrids. But there were many others listed, like Pindi Pearl,Sunset Fantasy, Strawberry Parfait, White Bouquet, Wattle Bird,Cristo Rey, and many more. Some of these were old timers, others were unfamiliar to me so maybe this choice depends very much on what you are growing and will always be rather a personal matter.

7.Did the hot summer have any unusual effects on your garden.?
Two comments seem to sum up the position in general :-
Mrs Porter writes:"Here at Beecroft in the Sydney Hills area, we used to enjoy good rains. But in recent years that has greatly diminished and many gardeners, instead of mainly growing exotics and soft garden plants are looking for more drought resistant plants."
And Barry Paget writes:-"In Brisbane we have had a horrific summer - the hottest and driest in a long time. I had some scorching in some of my plants but lost very little. I find that here in Brisbane when the weather is hot, most of my plants stop growing and resume growth now when the temperature is not so great. I find that there is never much flowering in summer. R.zoelleri is a plant which flowers most of the year,including midsummer. Currently 'Sweet Seraphim is flowering particularly well. I have some 20 or so plants in full bloom and making a fabulous show. Of course I have had numerous other hybrids blooming in dribs and drabs."

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PLANTING VIREYAS

From Sylvia Saperstein, Main Arm, Mullumbimby, N.S.W.
"When I have planted large Vireyas in my garden, I have found that it takes at least a year before they become established: that is before they stop wilting at the slightest moisture stress So when I sell large plants I always advise customers to use an automatic watering system for at least twelve months. I also suggest planting out large Vireyas from late March to the end of September. A combination of heat and drought can be fatal! As an experiment I planted out a few Vireyas that were barely more than tubed, in my own garden. I made a cosy little nest for them with a slight mound of soil and potting mix amd mulched them well. They surprised me by establishing in three months and could then stand considerable drying out and competition from large tree ferns two feet away. It makes sense really.

Vireyas are surface rooters so when a large plant goes into the ground half of its roots go to a depth that is not natural to them and they die off. This hunch was confirmed when I moved a large old Vireya. It had a very large mat of roots just a few inches under the soil, with the odd anchor root. I believe that many gardeners are discouraged from growing Vireyas because they don't have the information to avoid ending up with sad straggly plants."

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From Neil Puddey, P.O.Box 126, Woolgoolga, N.S.W.

"This spring-summer has certainly tested my ability to grow good Vireya. The 30% shade cloth that covers my shade house seems to have been too light. Regardles of fertiliser, many plants exhibited yellowing, not classic chlorosis but yellowing consistent with excessive light. On some plants there were also sun blotches where part of the leaf turned completely brown.

It was interesting to see plants, with even more exposure come through with little ill effect.'Pink Pizzazz' a large leafed variety was on my 'to be culled list' but after producing some beautiful large bi-coloured flowers I decided to keep them but locate them outside the shade house in almost full sun. These plants have survived, look a little leggy but healthy and are now producing lots of bud.

I am confident in saying that the plants that exhibited most sun damage or died were new plantings where root systems had not established.Older well grown plants that have extensive root systems, evidenced by their reduced need for constant watering,have come through these extreme conditions unaffected. The value of a good root system cannot be ignored.

Who can enlighten me on the dieback I am seeing in late summer? It does not seem to be a general condition but one common to 'Simbu Sunset','Flamenco Dancer','Haloed Gold',R.laetum,R.lochiae,'Iced Primrose','Toff' and 'Sweet 'Amanda'. There may be others susceptible, have other growers seen this? The problem begins at the apex of a shoot/stem and works its way towards the trunk, sometimes resulting in the death of several large branches. Is it a fungus?

Has anyone out there in the Vireya world had allergic reactions resulting from contact with Vireya? Over the last six months I have found that if the leaves came in contact with my face, within a few hours I swell as if stung by a bee.My reaction may be unique but the doctor I sought treatment from explained that the family Rhododendron are known to produce allergies.

Mealy Bug and White Wax Scale have been resisting my control efforts. White Oil, Rogor, and Malathion have all failed me, can others suggest an alternative?

The hybrids on the top of my 'performers' list would be'Kisses','Inferno' 'Just Peachy' and 'Sunset Fantasy'.

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David Leach's article 'The Ancient Curse Revisited' in the March '92 issue of'The Rhododendron' details accounts of allergic reactions suffered by propagators handling rhododendron cuttings, especially of lepidotes and azaleas, and of urticaria (hives) contracted by susceptible persons removing faded flower trusses or even brushing against rhododendrons in flower. There is also a high danger of poisoning from the nectar of some, especially Vireyas, from my personal experience.

Editor.