Vireya Venture

Issue 49 Nov 2002



Inferno – the definitive orange

Vireya the tough

Spring has been very dry and on some occasions hot, 36 degrees Celsius on one day last week. Despite the hostile conditions Vireyas have continued to perform well. Lack of rain and stored water for irrigation has meant that some Vireys in our garden have had to survive on soil moisture alone for extended periods. One group of an older hybrid Flaming Ball have not received any water for over six weeks but still managed to flower. Admittedly the flowers were small and barely opened but the plants look fine. This group have been established in the garden for 8 years. Vireyas have the reputation for being a little hard to grow requiring fairly specific conditions for growth and survival. This may well be true but my experience is that once established they can survive quite a deal of environmental insults.

Periodic drought is the norm for much of Australia, our native plants and animals have developed some amazing adaptations for survival during these prolonged dry spells. The Macadamia Nut for those who did not know originated in Northern N.S.W. / South Eastern Queensland. This is one of the very few Australian Plants that has been commercialised though enjoyed by Indigenous people for thousands of years. The Macadamia requires only 30%

of the water that most other commercial fruit and nut trees require to produce a normal crop.

Vireyas evolving in tropical highland where extended Dry periods are experienced must also have adaptations to survive. This spring /summer is going to test this theory if prevailing conditions continue.

I was recently told stories of frost survival as well. Winter this year also produced some extremes. Over a period of one week our sub-tropical east coast suffered some very severe frosting . The local sugar cane crop was almost destroyed, harvesting had to be brought forward by over a month. Some vireyas were lost but other gardeners told stories of Vireyas covered with frost yet suffered little or no damage.

A recent mail order of bare rooted Vireyas spent 14 days in a box without light ,water or nutrient and most survived. Just how tough are these plants if cultivated well ??

Landscaping with Vireya

In our garden there are over 200 Vireyas planted out into the landscape . Kathryn and I have used them as others use Azalea. Some beds are tiered with bushy low growing hybrids to the front and taller open types to the back. Mixed colour beds have been planted with little thought , other than flower bed colour, whilst some areas have been planned with multiple plantings of one type to create a specific effect. Perfumed types when well place can add another dimension. A massed planting of Aravir in full flower challenges Gardenia plantings. How are you using Vireya ,what are they contributing to your garden ?? Please send a photo or provide a description, I am sure others are interested. Much of the information published on Vireya is technical and mostly of interest to the specialist. Lets have some Gardeners stories.

Performers

Bushy Habit – Kisses, Charming Valentino, Veronica Maureen
Repeat Flowering – Just Peachy, Haloed Gold
Perfume – Strawberry Parfait, Aravir, Gardenia
Vibrant – Brilliantine, Inferno, Uluru
Elegant – Highland Peace, Jean Baptist, Highland Pink Cloud
All Rounders – Blaze of Glory, Blondi, Cara Mia , Sunset Fantasy
Hanging Basket – Littlest Angel
Show Stopper – The Trophy, The Star
Watch out for – Beejay Bay, Genzelle

Contributions of Photos ,Experiences, Requests all gratefully accepted. Our membership is small and I fear fading as this newsletter may if I am the only contributor.

Editor



Rhododendron *Christi*

DR R.M. WITHERS

One of the most attractive of the small to medium-sized flowered rhododendrons species introduced into cultivation from Papua, New Guinea is R. *christi*.

The typical species is described by Dr. H. Sleumer in "An account of Rhododendron in Malesia" as a small stiff, sparsely branched shrub, terrestrial or epiphytic 0.3 to 1.2 m. in height. The leaves are in pseudowhorls of 3 at the upper 2 or 3 nodes and are ovate, subsessile with the apex acutely pointed. The corolla 3.5. to 4 cm. long in all with a short curved tube yellow or greenish-yellow in its basal part becoming red or orange red towards the end of the tube and the corolla lobes are red or orange red. There are 3 to 4 florets to the truss. R. *christi* is widely spread in the wild in Eastern New Guinea.

Our first experience of R. *christi* was in 1971, when the late Don Stanton visited Papua, New Guinea and reported that when travelling with Mr. Lou Searle up the Wahgi Gorge into the Gumini district, on a mountain top at about 2,460 m. he came upon a stand of R. *christi* and R. *schoddii* in flower. Don sent home seed labelled R. *christi* to members of the The Australian Rhododendron Society. However when the seedlings flowered several years later, although the leaves had looked somewhat similar to those of typical R. *christi*, the flowers 6 to a truss, were a uniform dark pink in colour and similar to those of R. *leptanthum*. The tube is longer and more curved than in typical R. *christi* and the corolla lobes are not so flared. Mr. Lou Searle has said that in the wild this plant grows side by side with plants of typical R. *christi*, and in his opinion it is a variation of the species. On the other hand it could be a hybrid with either R. *leptanthum* or R. *schoddii*.

The typical bicolour form of R. *christi* was introduced into cultivation in 1974 when Mr. Lou Searle sent plants to the Society collected at Ekuam on Mt. Digine at an altitude of about 2,460 m. under the number L. S. 11. In the wild, it was growing on dead treefern trunks, dead mossy logs, but mostly in sandy clay soil. These have grown well in cultivation and seeded freely. Very vigorous seedlings have been grown, all having typical bicolour flowers. This form has also been crossed with R. *stenophyllum* producing very vigorous and floriferous hybrid seedlings with leaves similar to those of R. *stenophyllum* and flowers similar to those of R. *christi*.

A further introduction of R. *christi* was received from Mr. Paul Kores in the late 1970's. This has typical bicolour flowers but the leaves are more rounded and a darker green than those of the Lou Searle introduction.

In 1981 when the group from The Australian Rhododendron Society visited Papua New Guinea we did not see R. *christi* in the wild, but flowering stems of the typical form were presented to the party by the late Pundia Lepi on our return to Mt. Hagen from Wabag. He had collected these on Mt. Giluwe.

In 1983 during the second Australian Rhododendron Society tour R. *christi* was seen growing on Mt. Maip at an altitude of about 2,750 m. It was growing in company with R. *pleianthum*, R. *superbum*, and R. *vitis-idaea*. The flowers were always a bicolour, and the plants were growing in rainforest type conditions in the mulch on fallen trees.

The illustration on the front cover of this Journal is of special interest. This was collected by Mr. Lou Searle at an altitude of about 2,150 m. and sent to Melbourne in 1974 under the number L.S. 89 as his low altitude form of R. *christi*. It was found in a tribal area known as Sina Sina, in totally different conditions to L.S. 11. It was exposed to the afternoon sun, and was growing in the fissures of decomposing rock, almost in scree. The leaves are the same as those of the type when mature but they do not have the purplish red colour of typical R. *christi* when young. When this plant eventually flowered it was apparent that it was quite different from the typical form of R. *christi*. The yellow tube is shorter thant that of the type, and the corolla lobes are larger and more flared. Of special interest is the fact that whereas three of the corolla lobes are red, in the other two the yellow colour of the tube extends into the corolla lobe. Unlike non-Vireya Rhododendrons, this is the first Vireya I have flowered in which the corolla lobes have not been identical in colour. Is this plant a variety of R. *christi*, a natural hybrid of R. *christi*, or is it a new species ?

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Were these questions ever answered?