Vireya Venture

October 2003 Issue 53



Shannon Marie hybrid – Brian Clancy



Pandashay – Graham Snell



Uluru – Sylvia Saperstein



Pretty Lady – Graham Snell

Australian Vireya Hybridists have certainly produced some stunning new crosses. Graham Snell, Sylvia Saperstein and Brian Clancy deserve recognition for their skill in combining species and hybrids in first cross , back crosses and some quite complex crosses bringing together genes from up to four species. Their quest for early and repeat flowering of quality blooms on bushes with improved growth habit is certainly paying dividens. As I wander around my nursery, it is hard to believe that all these plants belong to the one species. The variation in form from the compact miniature to the large leafed erect types is amazing. These hybrids are now grown in Taiwan, Thailand, Hawaii, Tahiti, New Caledonia, Mainland America, England, Scotland, New Zealand and Belgium. Well done Sylvia, Graham and Brian.

Editor

Reflections of a novice Vireya enthusiast

My initial introduction to Vireya's was via my brother Neil some 12 years ago. I must say a lot of my enthusiasm for the delightful plant was reflected from Neil, and with the offer of some freebies and the challenge to gauge their suitability to the more southern coastal regions of NSW I was delighted to take home a few plants each time I visited. My gardening skills are a bit shy and what tends to have grown best in my backyard to this point were succulents such as Agave's and Gymea lilies that weren't reliant on TLC. (Tender Loving Care)

I was charged with instructions to ensure " good drainage, water every day, but make sure they don't get their feet wet!" I live on a sandstone hill of which most of the topsoil has over the years deposited at the bottom of Lake Macquarie. The land faces due east. Many large gum trees abound in my yard and on the vacant block on my northern border, these gums ensure filtered sunlight throughout the day. We were really unaware at this point in time of the Vireyas capacity to tolerate full sun and thus conditions seemed ideal.

Where I felt the sun was most extreme on the roots of my plants I used a lot of leaf mulch and also used moss as a decorative as well as protective layer to keep surface roots cool. Little of this moss remains to day however those plants that have lots of other plants growing around their base have continued to flourish. Another trial I employed after a visit to Neil's was to plant a Vireya in a spent Stag Horn shell, with varied success, the only problem now being a Crows Nest trying to compete for space.

The best plantings have been on the Eastern and Northern aspects of my property and a couple of the original plants are today over 6' tall. Haloed Gold, Orange Wax, Claire Rouse, Lady Di, Vladimir Boukowsky, Sweet Wendy, Sweet Seraphim to name a few, continue to grow despite my neglect in terms of fertilising, and tip pruning. This last visit to Neil's has taught me a little more in the care of my plants, especially when potting up, so if I go now and do a little more work for him, hopefully I will be favoured with the odd newer variety freebie to take home.

Sue Puddey

Vireya Hybridising Aims - Sylvia Saperstein

When I started a small wholesale vireya nursery I was so dazzled by the hybrids on offer, I considered that hybridizing was the province of experts.

However a visit from a garden club about twice a year is a real wake-up call to a wholesaler. I discern a sort of love-hate relationship between the gardening public and vireyas. In the couple of hours that they are in the nursery one feels quite overwhelmed by the excitement they show at the floral display, and equally their frustration at their own lack of flowers, and at the death of their plants.

"What am I doing wrong?" is the most common lament. Once the obvious problems of poor education about drainage and light have been dealt with, there is nothing else to blame but the plant itself. Apart from a fairly short list of hybrids, most will grow to a considerable size before their first flowering. I have thrown out plants that have not flowered once in ten years despite their size and obvious good health. Some of these I gave to my friend Lou Searle who lived two degrees south of our nursery and he was delighted to report that many of these flowered abundantly.

What became clear is that much more attention needs to be paid to the provenance of the species with regard to altitude as well as habitat when hybrids are made. I talk of altitude as it relates to light intensity and temperature - the higher the cooler and the brighter. It occurred to me that breeders need to be mindful of the climatic conditions for which their plants are being bred. Any cross that involves a high altitude species which dominates in its hybrids is quite likely to perform poorly in an either tropical or subtropical climate.

So the wish list of the initiated vireya buyer in our subtropical area goes like this:

1) Juvenile flowering
2) Some sun and heat tolerance
3) More than one flush per year
4) Well-shaped bushy young plants
5) More interesting foliage

The requirements of the retailer are simpler- hardy, bushy vireyas, like Simbu Sunset, that are in flower when they are dispatched from the nursery is all they ask. Any flower will do. I am astounded to realise that retailers who have been selling vireyas for ten years still don't remember more than one or two names. What they want is a product that sells.

Plant breeders, the ones I know anyway, are passionate about their progeny and are driven by a desire to produce extraordinarily beautiful flowers, but breeding is all about being ruthless in discarding hybrids which even a besotted parent can see aren't quite up to scratch commercially. Regrettable as it might seem, it's the buying public that puts a plant on the map. I as a latecomer on the scene and with little genetic material to juggle anyway, decided to take a pragmatic approach, and focus on gardener friendliness instead.

I don't want to bore you with dozens of slides, so I will confine myself to discussing just five that best illustrate my aims. I had a hunch that the species that dominate in a cross will influence its performance in any given climate. This influence will be determined by the altitude, light requirement and length of time till flowering. For this reason I have concentrated on the lowland species in my hybrids, bred specifically for the subtropics, and my assumptions appear to be confirmed by the five I will describe.

1) 'Thai Prince' (*zoellen* x (*laetum* x *zoellen*). 'Simbu Sunset' is the most successful hybrid sold in Australia because of its brilliant colour and juvenile flowering habit, but it is somewhat leggy when young and is prone to aerial phytophtera and rhizoctonia. I noticed that *zoellen* had neither of these problems and, owing to the heavy protective cuticle on the leaves, seems less prone to insect attack. Both of the species involved are from around 1000m in altitude and appear to grow in strong light. This new hybrid is basically 'Simbu Sunset' with an extra hit of *zoellen* and has the virtues of both parents in flowering freely, vigour, sun- tolerance and brilliant colour. In addition it initiates between 2 and 5 laterals when the apical bud is removed, and the internodes (like those of zoellen) are curved, giving the plant a dense,compact appearance. The flowers are 10 cm across. So I like to claim that 'Thai Prince' is more than the sum total of its parents. And it is undoubtedly gardener friendly.

2) 'Wild Child' ('Fireplum' (*phaeopeplum* x *lochiae*) x *zoellen*) x 'Simbu Sunset' (*laetum* x *zoelleri*)) 'Fireplum' is one of my favorites, but is too sensitive to sunburn to do well in our area in any but the most carefully chosen sites. By crossing it with 'Simbu Sunset' with its two lowland species I hoped to dilute the influence of *phaeopeplum* without losing it entirely. The perfumed flowers of 'Wild Child' are certainly its legacy, and their brilliant red refers to the influence of *lochiae*. Once again the double dose of *zoellen* imparts a vigour and a hardiness that should give the average gardener a fighting chance.

3) 'Palamino' ('Buttermilk' (*konori* x *aurigeranum*) x 'Wattle Bird' (*laetum* x *aurigeranum*) I have heard much praise for 'Wattle Bird', but much complaint as well-too leggy, too slow to flower. By crossing it with 'Buttermilk', I have produced a large scented yellow flower on an upright vigorous bush, which is sunhardy, a quality imparted most probably by the strong presence of *aurigeranum* with its lowland, exposed provenance. A bonus is its tendency to initiate many laterals. 'Palamino' is quite striking in appearance and is certainly easy to grow.

4) 'Belinda Chang'('Highland Arabesque' (*orbiculatum* x (*laetum* x *aurigeranum*) x 'Wattle Bird' (*laetum* x *aurigeranum*) This hybrid turned out to be the propagator's dream plant - very bushy owing to the huge number of laterals, low and dense as well as freeflowering. The flowerstalks are short so the truss looks obediently upward, showing off its deep pink flowers that lighten as they age. The downside of this cross is that despite its vigour, it requires protection from strong light which bleaches both foliage and flowers. In hindsight it is clear that the source of the colour is orbiculatum to a large degree and with it the need for more shade.

5) 'Lavender Cloud' ('Highland Arabesque' (*orbiculatum* x (*laetum* x *aurigeranum*) x *retivinium*). I must confess that this was a random cross. I had been sent some *retivinium* pollen and I wandered around with it burning a hole in my hand until I hit on a flower, any flower with a receptive stigma. If you look at the species involved you will see that, quite accidentally, there is only one highland species present and it has taken a backseat. Almost everything in this plant speaks of *orbiculatum*, its pale ovate leaves, its delicately mauve perfumed flowers that fade to a pure white. But the downside of *orbicutatum* (its annoying floppy habit and refusal to initiate any more than one or two laterals) is quite absent. What surprises me is that the salient characteristics of all the other species appear to be so recessive as to colour and habit, but the resulting hybrid is well shaped, vigorous and sturdy, so they must have a lurking presence. This same cross produced several pure yellow seedlings and some in between - all with the same foliage and habit.

To sum up, these five hybrids all flower more than once a year and should make their presence felt for much of the year.

Since I have looked at Chris Callard's wondrous CD and have seen for the first time pictures of species like *crassifolium* and *fallicinium* I feel dismay at the distance between some of my hybrids and their parents. I explain myself by asking you to imagine crossing a mouse with an elephant to produce something like a hippo. I would prefer to produce a mighty mouse or a pink elephant, thus preserving the intrinsic nature of each. I am very concerned that we breeders are in danger of producing the same genetic soup that we see in roses and azaleas by mindless crosses. Why produce 'big blowsies' as Bill Moyles calls them when we have a Pandora's box of 300 virtually pristine species to exploit? A plant should not simply be a structure to carry flowers. A thoughtful combination of species with complementary colour, flower shape and habit can produce vigorous hybrids with striking variety in all aspects.

The trouble is that the public taste is inclined towards the big blowsies. However surely if breeders can make imaginative use of species and try to enhance their distinguishing features rather than dilute them, we can shape public taste. I illustrate this point by referring to the charming miniatures bred by Brian Clancy and the elegant 'Gwenevere' bred by Graham Snell. It isn't of any consequence to the gardener to know the parentage of these two - it is their distinctive appearance that delights the eye. They aren't the same old burger with a different sauce. I for one have no interest in continuing hybridizing unless I can produce plants that promote diversity, as well as plants that will prosper in the hands of competent gardeners.

Australian Hybridisers - Vireyas
Vireya Venue Hybridising Programme – Graham Snell

I appreciate the opportunity to present this short illustration of my all-consuming interest. The slides are not all my own and in some cases the hybrids are not either. However, the majority are from the Vireya Venue stab1e.
I have divided the slides into six distinct segments, five of which illustrate the direction I am taking, the final segment being more general with no obvious slot to fit into. Time constraints limit me to just a few examples of each segment.

First, the Dr. John Rouse hybrid 'Australia II' [(*phaeopeplum* x *lochiae*) x *zoellen*)] x *leucogigas* (Flower dimensions approx. W 100mm, L 95mm) which he made in about 1980, together with some sister seedlings of John's cross, and some of my own using the same configuration of parents. The size, perfume and variety of these outstanding blooms are the attraction here.
'AUSTRALIA II' HYBRIDS discussed
'Divinity', 'Pink Organdie'; 'Good Pink', 'Reveille'; 'Unnamed White'; 'Jenzelle' (W 110mm, L90mm)

Secondly, 'Gardenia Odyssey', which was introduced to Australia in 1973 by Bill Mearns. I used this cultivar as both seed and pollen parent between 1985 and 1986 and shared seedlings at a Society Victorian Branch meeting before leaving for Queensland in 1988. To the best of my knowledge the only hybrid from these crosses which has been registered to date, is 'Teddy's Best', registered by Brian Clancy and illustrated on the cover of Volume 37 of The Rhododendron. I have no slide of this cultivar, however, some others are shown here. Virtually every seedling grown on has proved to be worthwhile, with real quality in the blooms, perfume, and a large number of flowers per truss. I am continuing to use 'Gardenia Odyssey', as also, I believe, are other hybridists in Australia and the USA.
'GARDENIA ODYSSEY' HYBRIDS discussed
'Mandalay' ['Gardenia Odyssey' x (*lateum* x *aurigeranum*)]; 'Mallee Moon'; 'Sunburst' ['Gardenia Odyssey' x (*lateum* x *aurigeranum*)]; 'Highland Peace' ['Gardenia Odyssey' x (*lateum* x *aurigeranum*)] (Head Diameter 200mm, W 80mm, L90mm); 'Gold Bullion' (*laetum* x 'Gardenia Odyssey'; 'Gardenia Odyssey' x *laetum* hybrids; unnamed 'Gardenia Odyssey' hybrid.

The third segment uses the species *R. baenitzianum* as a parent. *R. baenitzianum* was collected by the late Canon Cruttwell and at one time was described bv him as one of the finest species he had ever come across. As a parent it provides a velvety sheen on the blooms of its progeny, together with a brilliant depth of colour, which I find unique. I have found this species quite difficult to grow, but have made several crosses most of which are very exciting.
R. BAENITZIANUM HYBRIDS discussed
'Beejay Bay' ['Bold Janus' (*leucogigas* x *laetum*) x *baenitzianum*] (Head D 220mm, W 120mm , L90mm); 'Richie' ('Bold Janus' x *baenitzianum*); 'Sugared Ginger' ('Bold Janus' x *baenitzianum*); 'Powerhouse' ['Simbu Sunset' (*laetum* x *zoelleri*) x *baenitzianum*] (W100mm, L80mm); 'Elenganza' ['Elegant Bouquet' (*phaeopeplum* x *aurigeranum*) x *baenitzianum*].

My fourth avenue has been in using R *leucogigas*, seeing how far the colour range can be stretched in these large, perfumed flowering hybrids. Also, because I have found R *leucogigas* so hard to grow, I have been crossing some *leucogigas* hybrids back to the species to try and produce a plant that has flowers like the species itself. I have yet to achieve this objective.
LEUCOGIGAS HYBRIDS discussed
'Easter Bonnet' (*leucogigas* x *zoelleri)* x (*laetum* x *zoellen*) (W130mm, L100mm); 'Highland Pink Cloud'; 'Superfleur' (*leucogigas* x *zoelleri*) (W120mm, L90mm); 'Tiari Tahiti'; unnamed [*leucogigas* x (*laetum* x *leucogigas*) x *phaeopeplum*]; 'The Trophy' (*leucogigas* x *christianae)* (W120mm, L120mm); unnamed (leucogigas x *zoellen*) hybrid; 'Shantung Pink'.

Another line of approach has been the old faithful F2. Selfing promising hybrids has often produced outstanding progeny, and would be a good path for any enthusiast to follow. However, I believe hybrids that self themselves too readily should be avoided in this exercise as it would just perpetuate this unwelcome characteristic.
F2 HYBRIDS discussed
'Go for Gold' 'Wattlebird' F2; 'Duchess Satin' (*konori* x *konori*); 'Princess Primrose' (*konori* x *laetum*) F2

Finally, some random hybrids that illustrate some of my interests, such as:
1) Colour intensity.
2) Using *R. orbiculatum* which does not self readily, and has good perfume.
3) Big, rounded head with a high number of flowers per truss.
4) The unusual in flower shape or leaf character.
5) Whites and perfume, trying to obtain a pure white that stays white.
6) The miniature. There is a lot of room for work in this direction.

7) R. *hellwigii* The quality and size of R. *hellwigii* that I have seen in cultivation here in Australia, are not up to the potential that I believe exists in this species. The hybrids I have seen to date, have disappointed me. What I dream of is a brilliant deep red the size of R. konori or R leucogigas, and with a strong perfume. We can all dream!
OTHER HYBRIDS OF INTEREST discussed
'Inferno'; 'Pandashay' (W75mm, L85mm); 'Lilac Time'; 'Sunset Gold 50' (aurigeranum hybrid) (Head D 190mm, Height 150mm); 'Morning Star'; 'Gwenevere' (jasminiflorum hybrid); 'Silvery Moon'; 'Highland Debutante' (sauveolens hybrid); 'Angelique'.
As an epilogue, even though we are not now in the wholesale Nursery Trade, visitors are always welcome.