VIREYA VINE

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R.S.F. PO BOX 3798, FEDERAL WAY, WA. 98063
E. White Smith, Editor

Sad news: Fran Rutherford passed away on Friday, July 17, 2009. Fran has helped put out the Vireya Vine with me for the last 27 years. He did a lot of the proof reading and had the Vine copied. He also did all of the mailing to people around the world. Fran went with a group of Australians and New Zealand Vireya people to Papua New Guinea in August of 1986. His story is printed in VV12. Maybe for the next issue of the Vine I will print it again.

The new tropical display house, the Rutherford Conservatory at the Species Foundation Garden is close to being finished (July 22, 2009), not planted but built. Fran was one of the main contributors to this building. It will be world class someday. This you will have to see! At least Fran did know that the Conservatory was being built. Rest in Peace Fran, you were one of the good guy and a good friend of mine. E. White.

Vireyas in Florida

From Jim Norquest West Palm Beach, Florida
Dear Vireya Vine January 2009

"It is not nice to garden anywhere. Everywhere there are violent winds, startling once-per-five-centuries floods, unprecedented droughts, record-setting freezes, abusive and blasting heats never known before. There is no place, no garden, where these terrible things do not drive gardeners mad."
- Henry Mitchell The Essential Earthman

Gardening in Florida must be paradise, right? No frost, no snow, constant sunshine, balmy breezes…I mean, they named the place "Florida", which means "land of flowers", so.

Well, let me enlighten you. Florida is not all peaches and cream, garden-wise. First of all, much of the time it is HOT. Not balmy, not just warm, but hot. And humid. I mean soggy, Turkish-bath humid. Day and night. From mid-May through late October the average nighttime low temperature does not drop below 70F.

And from mid-March through late November the average daytime high temperature is over 80F. West Palm Beach, my fair city, is in AHS heat zone 11, which means that we have 180 to 210 days per year above 86F.

And then there is the "soil", which is just glorified sand. At certain times of year we have day after day of blustering, desiccating winds. With no frost, we get fire ants and a thousand other pests. We have clouds of bloodthirsty mosquitoes. And I haven't even talked about the hurricanes.

This is what I faced when we transplanted ourselves to Florida from the north some years ago, leaving behind a small but much-loved rhododendron collection. At first I sulked. (My wife says this phase continues.) But eventually I decided that I was here for the duration and I'd better make the best of it. Besides, I could not not garden. I never lost my love for rhododendrons but I was not foolish enough to imagine that I could grow my old favorite evergreens here. I did try for years to grow deciduous azaleas, especially a few of the more southern-ranging natives. Results: death. Sometimes quick, sometimes lingering, but always death.

Finally a few years ago I came across an article about vireyas, and a light came on. But of course! Tropical rhododendrons! Incredible colors, a wonderful multitude of forms, sizes, growth habits, foliage types. They seemed to be the ideal solution, a way to satisfy my continuing love for rhododendrons in this dismal climate. And so they have been. Vireyas are vastly exciting and rewarding to grow, but they are not effortless in Florida. Mistakes were made, as the politicians say.

I began by ordering a number of beauties based almost entirely on flower color. The results were initial enchantment, often followed by disappointment. Some of them promptly died during their first summer in paradise. A few just slowly declined or simply did not thrive, looking sulky and unhappy, but most died suddenly, almost certainly of phytophthera or one of its nasty cousins. I tried different planting mixes, new pots, new fertilizers, different exposures and levels of sunlight--with the same results.

I am nothing if not persistent. Eventually I went back to basics and began reading and studying everything I could get my hands on about vireyas. What I learned is that many of the species and hybrids I had bought had their genetic origins in high elevation areas of the tropics where days may be warm and humid but nights are cool if not cold. The varieties I had purchased were simply not suited to my growing conditions. The gardener's age-old dilemma.

Well, I may be a slow learner but I do learn. I began keeping careful notes from the literature about vireya species which originate at lower elevations, and their hybrids. I also began to note species which occur over a wide range of elevations, and over wide swaths of geography, figuring that this indicates toughness and adaptability. I read accounts by other tropical gardeners and especially vireya growers in various places in the world. I watched "good-doer" lists from areas with warm climates. Ultimately I compiled a list of species and hybrids which should, theoretically at least, do well here, and I began ordering my plants from this list instead of just picking what caught my eye.

The results have been more than gratifying. Over the last few years my losses have dropped nearly to zero, and I am enjoying unprecedented success with vigorous growth and, of course, flowers. We just finished another south Florida summer and (knock on wood) I have not lost a single plant except for a couple of my own weakly-rooted cuttings.

I have also continued to refine my growing techniques. I grow most of my plants in containers because it is easier to control the soil that way, and to move the plants when conditions warrant.

I use a loose pine bark or cocoanut chip-based mix. I prefer clay pots, especially orchid pots because the openings provide better air circulation to the roots. Many of the larger plants are plunged pot and all into raised beds of sawdust to keep the roots cool. The long term viability of pot culture is questionable, however, as the plants get bigger. We shall see.

Water is a continuing concern. We get about 60" of rain a year but the majority of it comes during the summer and winters are usually dry and often windy. Our municipal water is alkaline and full of nasty chemicals. Fortunately we have a well which provides better water. During the hot months and windy periods the plants dry out quickly, and a few days without rain or supplemental watering lead to quick death. This makes vacations a tricky proposition. I also do not like to water too much during our long humid periods because I think it encourages disease.

The trickiest growing variable, however, is light. There seems to be a great variation in light requirements for vireyas. Two varieties situated side by side may result in heavy bloom on one and hardly any on its neighbor, so one eventually must be moved to a more exposed spot. At this latitude the sun will be directly over head during summer and scorching hot, so plant placement is crucial. You must give them enough sun to encourage flowering, but too much leads to excessive drying and wilting or requires more water than I like to give them.

When the plants are properly selected and their needs are met, however, vireyas in south Florida are very rewarding. Looking back over the past three years during which I have kept records, I find that at least one variety has been in bloom every month of the year, with peaks of blooming activity during March/April, September/October, and December/January. A few varieties have shown bloom during five months of some years; others are much shyer. Interestingly, the peak bloom periods vary from year to year, while still generally conforming to the pattern of heavier concentrations in spring and fall. It will be fun to see how these patterns hold up over time as the plants mature.

Even though my plants are still relatively young, certain hybrids are already certifiably "good doers" for me. These include an unnamed Schick hybrid from Bovees identified as V66 (laetum x zoelleri), 'Ring of Fire' (Cherry Liqueur x Narnia), 'Haloed Gold' (christianae x Tropic Glow), 'Kisses' (Tropic Glow x (viriosum x macgregoriae), and 'Dawn Chorus' (same cross). Others showing promise include 'Tango Time' (macgregoriae x christianae) and 'Popcorn' (macgregoriae x loranthiflorum). Although I love them, no species have yet made it onto the list of stars.

I would welcome news and advice from vireya growers with similar conditions. There don't seem to be many of us here.

Jim Norquest
1002 Ardmore Road
West Palm Beach, Fl 33401

From Anne O'Brian January 28, 2009

Dwarf Rhododendrons

Winter officially began just a few weeks ago. For a while yet we have to accept our dark and dreary weather –waiting for the occasional, fleeting promises of sun and warmth to increase in number. There are other signs around us that spring will come. Trees and shrubs are showing buds along their branches. The fattest buds of all are those of the rhododendrons, shrubs that grow and flower as well as hydrangeas on Cape Cod.

I have an east-facing bed with dappled shade during the afternoon. Many years ago I had a lovely collection of heaths and heathers. It was devastating when a particularly long cold spell killed them all. Unwilling to risk a second loss by replanting heathers, I decided that dwarf rhododendrons would find the long, narrow bed ideal. Earlier I had picked up a book by Harold E. Greer, titled "Greer's Guidebook to Available Rhododendrons" at the Heritage Plantation. I began my collection with four or five and have added one or two each year. These are thriving, lovely plants, small, dense, slow-growing, spreading mounds of varied leaf forms and colors. Some are tiny, matte or shiny, others are scaly or softly felted, grey and fuzzy. They offer a wealth of winter texture and color you cannot find among the bigger rhododendrons. None of them will ever be over two feet tall, several will spread wider. The flowers vary as much as the leaves. Luscious pale pink cultivars have been developed from Japan's hardy yakushimana island species, familiarly known as the Yaks. 'Patty Bee', part "Yak" part *keiski*, is a lovely yellow, as is 'Wren'. 'Chikor' is another lovely yellow. Others are pure white, lavender or deep purple. I also have a clear, deep red beauty, named 'Carmen'. Some will be available locally. Each spring blue Scillas pop up throughout the bed and I add to the show with lots of purple pansies. This bed has become a favorite spot in my garden.

In fact, my growing fascination for dwarf rhododendrons inspired me to learn more on the web and I have discovered the amazing Vireyas. Most all are from South Pacific islands. The Vireyas number about 300 hundred among the total of 900 plus species of rhododendrons found worldwide. Two hundred of them come from West New Guinea and Papua New Guinea. Most are terrestrial, though some are epiphytes living in the upper canopy of rain forest trees. Most are found at higher altitudes on cool, damp cloud-covered hillsides. Some bloom several times during the year, others continuously. The colors of these tropicals are clear as there is no blue pigment and none are ever spotted. Many are vibrant yellows and oranges. There is a gallery of these exotic beauties at Vireya.net. I am now growing dwarfs indoors to have rhododendrons in bloom year-round - on the windowsill in winter, on the terrace in summer. There is only one nursery in the lower 48 states with Vireyas for sale. It's Bovees in Portland, Oregon. When I called to place a small order, one I requested, a frequent bloomer with relaxed orange bell-like trusses, called 'Lucie Sorensen', brought a chuckle from the other end. I paused, and she said "I am Lucie Sorensen-Smith". Fate does have a way of making outdoor and indoor gardening personal and special.

Anne O'Brien, Chatham Garden Club member
President, Friends of Trees

From Jan and Brian Oldham Auckland New Zealand
Dear Vireya Vine February 2009

The local Vireya scene has had a few setbacks in the last year or so here in New Zealand.

Firstly, the last summer of 2008-2009 was hot and drought-stricken. Potted plants did not do well. Water in Auckland city is very expensive and was much needed to keep potted and evergreen plants alive. There was quite a bit of leaf burn on both new and mature foliage. Potted casualties were high for those people who took long summer holidays.

We had the misfortune to lose John Kenyon's innovative nursery in Tauranga on the east coast of the North Island. Commercial propagators are finding the times very tough and many of the garden centers are reducing to the backyard best sellers. Even the demand is low as gardening in general is losing its appeal to trendy palms and succulents.

We have also lost Richard Curry from the scene. Richard had a very large collection of species which he grew magnificently. He also did some very interesting hybridizations. As an amateur he found the demands of the collection too much and has moved to other interests. His collection has been scattered to enthusiasts far and wide. We at the Rhododendron Auckland Group have endeavored to keep a record of where the species went.

Of interest, we believe that Pukeiti (Pukeiti Rhododendron Trust Garden), under its new curator, is opting out of its hybrid vireya collection and concentrating entirely on species. There is indeed a great need for a well maintained permanent collection as a reservoir of seed for the amateur hybridist.

With the changing climatic conditions some interesting observations on cultivation have become obvious. This summer has been particularly hot and humid with a recorded maximum of 37.7C (99F), ideal conditions for phytophthora root rot. It has shown us the need to pot Vireyas in relatively shallow pots. Their roots are surface and shallow, unable to penetrate deeply even into open potting mix. Deep mix just holds water with deadly consequences.

It has been so noticeable to us to see how much better our Vireyas are doing when planted in the ground, albeit on well-drained sited and in generous amounts of treated pine bark. A cooler sheltered root run is at least one factor in this vigour. Their roots can continue to grow quite rapidly which, in turn, increases the plant size.

The matter of seasonal colour change in flowering still baffles us. In our climate the changes throughout the year are marked and unpredictable. We have very intense UV light here in NZ, measuring eleven plus (an extreme level) for much of the summer. This certainly does bleach the red pigment rapidly, but this last late summer we had quite intense infusions appearing and maintaining despite the extreme radiation levels. Obviously other factors are operative here. Any ideas? What is the experience of those on the Big Island of Hawaii?

While on the subject of weather and climate we have had some testing times with frost this last winter. Our open plantings are completely unprotected from our very occasional overnight radiation frost. This last winter was no exception. Air temperatures dropped to a degree or two (about 29F) below freezing for an hour or two just before dawn.

Surface temperatures on the leaves and lawn may have dropped more, to some minus 4C (22F). At that level of frost only the tender new leaves and shoots get nipped, an involuntary pruning that keeps the bush in bounds. In the most severe times we have to get up at daybreak and spray the foliage with the garden hose, a very successful preventative. The position of freezing is most variable. Streams of ultra-cold air, just two or three meters wide, wander around the plot and bite the odd plants while leaving the next quite unharmed. The injuries, however, are rarely fatal. Not for us the fancy alarmed and heated greenhouses. What is the Australian and South African experience with the vagaries of radiation frost?

Some eighteen months ago we received a near-terminal stick of a R. lowii which had been rescued from a neglected garden. After "hospitalization" it is now growing vigorously in its shallow pot. The leaf size has amazed us; great thick leaves 27cm long by 10 cm wide (about 11 inches x 4 or 5) and a great thick midrib. It has yet to flower but has given cuttings that strike readily. It long lanky canes are almost those of a creeper.

What are Viners' experiences with chance "volunteer" seedlings that pop up? In spite of an intensive programme of deadheading the odd one still appears in the pots. I have grown on a few but the results have not been great except for one beauty, probably from R. 'Haloed Gold' selfed, the most intense yellow of any Vireya I have seen, this on a burst of beautiful shiny olive-green leaves.

We do hope that our ramblings will initiate some correspondence to the "Vine". We would love to hear you all in other countries.

Jan & Brian Oldham
102 Meadowbank Rd. Meadowbank
Auckland 1005
New Zealand

A few things from the internet

On Sat, Feb 21, 2009 at 9:49 AM, <jpbruso@aol.com> wrote:
In a few words, don't use coffee grounds for rhododendron & azalea seedlings.
Never content with success, I'm always trying new methods to grow seedling rhododendrons and azaleas.
This fall I made use of the free bags of used grounds from our local Starbucks, mixing in about 1/6 or so by volume with my usual peat, perlite, pine bark & compost mix. This mix was used for the first transplant out of the seedling flats into 2.5" pots. Results are disastrous. All have "failure to thrive" syndrome - chlorotic and very slow growing, though none have died. Fertilizer didn't help. 3 weeks ago I shook the media off the roots of a number of them and re-planted in a mix without the grounds. Already they have greened up look very healthy and have started to grow at a normal pace.

These results surprised me, as the only negative I had read about using grounds was the potential for acidity - not a problem with rhodos, I thought. Also, supposedly most of the acidity is leached out when the coffee is brewed.
Any thoughts on what the issue is with coffee grounds? Joe Bruso, Hopkinton, MA

I have used coffee grounds for years (30) around rhododendrons. I use it to inhibit the activity of root weevils. It works. I scatter it in a thin layer around the plants where the root weevils would be active in the soil during the day. When used this way with a soil that tends to be basic, it also helps lower the acidity. I do not do it all the time, simply because of the supply where I am and because of my lazyness. Grounds are very acidic and in a mix with small seedlings I believe it would provide a mix that is too acidic and therefore harmful. Hank Helm, Bainbridge Island, Washington State

I've never incorporated coffee grounds in my seedling flats and would maybe lightly mix into a new planting site. I have found when growing seedlings in the basement under lites, they do not like organic matter in the mix. I used to put some cottonseed meal in to it, but molds started to form.
For my seedling flats, I mix 55% peat to 45% perlite. Tiny seedlings are transplanted into the 8"x6"x3" deep flats. When seedlings get some size, you can water by submerging the flat into a basin of water and fert or whatever. ...this way you can tilt the flat and drain off excess water and SALT!... By lifting the flat, you know exactly when to water. This method has kept my plants from burning up and growing to peak vigor.
A safe drench is with alfalfa meal... 1 tbl into a gallon of rain water . let sit a couple of days...drain off top water (do not use the sediment) and water the seedlings. Alfalfa is high in trace elements but a close bit to 7.5 PH.. Chris Trautmann

From internet February 21, 2009
Have used both coffee grounds and tea leaves around both Camellias and Rhodies (trick I learned from my father who grew Camellias successfully on chalky soil in Sussex, UK) but only in plants in the ground, I have never tried seedlings. This seems (in an uncontrolled experiment) to be very beneficial. Your comment about weevils is really useful and I will focus the coffee on the susceptible plants this year. Richard Flavell z6, 35F and sunny

Sorry but it has been six months since the last Vireya Vine. I have been waiting for some letters to come in. Without your input there will not be a Vireya Vine. Hey Viners, it's up to you. E White Smith

Get into this group and let's talk about Vireyas www.groups.yahoo.com/group/vireya

VIREYA NURSERIES

The Bovees Nursery (Lucie Sorensen-Smith)
1737 SW Coronado (E. White Smith)
Portland, OR 9721 9 USA
(503)-244-9341 or 1-800-435-9250
E-mail info@bovees.com www.bovees.com
Catalog on the internet (Mail Order)

Glendoick Gardens (Kenneth & Peter Cox
Glendoick, Perth Mail Order 1
Scotland, UK PH2 7N www.glendoick .com
Phone Nursery 073 886 205

D. & PJ. Brown
Vernom Road
Te Puna, Tauranga E-mail brownz@actrix.co.nz
New Zealand Phone (07)552-4966
www.homepages.ihug.co.nz/~brownnz

Mark Jury
Tikorangi, RD 43 E-mail jury@xtra.co.nz
Waitara, North Taranaki
New Zealand

Vireya Valley Nursery
Woori-Yallock Road
Cockatoo, Victoria 3781
Australia

Neil & Kathryn Puddey Nursery
PO Box 126, Woolgoolga, NSW Mail Order
Australia E-mail npuddey@bigpond.net.au
www.vireyaworldwide.net.au

White Cloud Nursery, Pete & Jane Adams,
PO Box 1387 Phone 808-345-3345
Pahoa, HI 96778 Mail order
www.whitecloudnursery.com

Rhododendron Species Foundation
PO Box 3798 www.rhodiegarden.org
Federal Way, WA 98063 USA
(253)-838-4646 Mail Order
E-mail rsf@rhodygarden.org

Vireyas NZ Tim & Yuan Edgecombe
PO Box 48 Waipapa
5 McCaughan Road, Kerikeri New Zealand web site at www.vireya.co..nz
Phone 09 407 5020
Mail Order NZ only E-mail info@vireyas.co.nz
They have bought and are growing John Kenyon's plants in Kerikeri
where they have established a wholesale tree and shrub nursery.

Pukeiti Rhododendron Trust
Carrington Rd. RD4
New Plymouth E-mail pukeiti@pukeiti.org.nz
New Zealand web site at www.pukeiti.org.nz

The Vireya Venue
2 Clifford Street www.vireyavenue.com
Maleny, Queensland 4552
Australia Phone (07)5494-2179

Pacific Island Nursery (Sherla Bertelmann & Richard Marques)
P. O. Box 1953 E-mail pacislenursery@interpac.net
Keaau, HI 96749 (808)966-9225 Mail Order
www.pacificislandnursery.com They also handle the Vireya seed exchange. WorldWide.

Multiflora Enterprises William Skimina
PO Box 556 Phone 760-723-8886
Bonsall, CA 92003 www.multifloraplants.com Mail Order

VIREYA VINE
RHODODENDRON SPECIES FOUNDATION
P. O. BOX 3798
FEDERAL WAY, WA 98063