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RHODODENDRON, CAMELLIA & MAGNOLIA GROUP

October 2015
Rhododendrons of section Vireya are often simply referred to as Vireyas sometimes loosely as ‘Malesian Rhododendrons’ or even more vaguely as ‘Tropical Rhododendrons’. Vireya is best for a popular name, it was coined by Carl Blume for his new genus of Rhododendron ‘allies’ from South-East Asia and was used to honour a French pharmacist friend of that name, but it was never widely accepted as a good genus. Malesia, the geographical area of the South-East Asian archipelago from the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra in the West, New Guinea in the East and the Philippine Islands in the North, is the region from which most of the Vireyas come but it is not all encompassing. A few of the species ‘escape’ the confines of this zone and a few rhododendrons from other sections have inconveniently penetrated this area so ‘Malesian’ is not without exceptions if used to describe this group. ‘Tropical rhododendrons’ in the strictest sense is also inappropriate as again, although the majority technically occur within the tropics, a few do occur north of the Tropic of Cancer. Worse, the term is badly misleading to growers, as the majority are montane plants from high altitudes which like cool conditions far removed from those obtained in the traditional stove house.

The first Vireya described was Rhododendron malayanum by William Jack, a Scotsman from Aberdeen. He was a surgeon in the employ of the East India Company and served as botanist to Sir Stamford Raffles on the west coast of Sumatra. Jack climbed Mt Bunko (Bengkoh) popularly known as the Sugar Loaf, just inland from Bencoolan. He commented that despite its low elevation ‘the character of its vegetation is decidedly alpine’. Here he collected this first Vireya which he correctly attributed to the genus Rhododendron despite (for the time) the surprising location. His plant descriptions were a model for their day: ‘corolla crimson, tubular, expanding into a five-lobed limb, sprinkled with callous dots, tube gibbous at the base and marked with five furrows’; describes well the flower of R.
malayanum so, despite the loss of the herbarium material upon which this description is based, there is no doubt about its identity. It is tragic that in the same year that Jack published this first Vireya he also died of pulmonary tuberculosis probably complicated with malaria, and even more so that most of his specimens, drawings and manuscripts were lost two years later when the Fame burned and sank at sea off Sumatra. Merrill gave the warmest tribute and said of Jack that he ‘was indeed the pioneer post-Linnaean Malaysian botanist’ and had he lived he might have added so much more.

Carl Blume was second in the field, a medical doctor who became director of the now Bogor Botanic Garden in 1822. He travelled widely in Java and published five species under his genus Vireya in 1826, three of which he must have seen at first hand. These plants were first brought to the attention of the public in an article in the Journal of The Royal Horticultural Society for 1848, where John Lindley firmly rejected the concept of the genus Vireya and reported on Sir Hugh Low’s findings in Borneo where the Vireyas were described as ‘perhaps the most gorgeous of the native plants’. He also hypothesized about the problems of their cultivation as epiphytes and must have aroused considerable interest. He may well have been partly responsible for the nurserymen Messrs Veitch of Exeter sending Thomas Lobb on an expedition to South-East Asia from where he brought back the first live Vireyas for cultivation in Britain in 1845. This was a very considerable feat. Anyone who collects today with the advantages of air transport knows to his cost how easy it is to lose Vireyas with even a small delay. What care and attention must have been given to these plants over a journey of many weeks by sea in closed glass Wardian cases.

Rhododendron javanicum (Bl.) Benn. caused a sensation on its introduction as its bright orange colour was at that time new for the genus. Veitch sent the plants for figuring in the Botanical Magazine (tab. 4336, 1847) with the remark that ‘it is certainly one of the finest things ever introduced to our gardens’. This was quickly followed by R. jasminiflorum Hook. (see figure 9) which was exhibited at the Chiswick Gardens exhibition in 1850 where it was reported that ‘few plants excited greater attention among the visitors most distinguished for taste and judgement’, and the strangeness of the flowers caused The Gardeners’ Chronicle to imply it was ‘probably no Rhododendron at all’. From seven listed species (six in the modern concept) hundreds of forms were obtained by cross pollination of what were passingly known as the javanico-jasminiflorum hybrids. They included double ‘balsamaeflorum’ types which have never been equalled and formed the basis of a remarkable genetic study (this was before Mendel’s classic genetic work on peas was known) by Professor G Henslow which was published by the RHS in 1891.
Several of these hybrids such as ‘Princess Alexandra’, ‘Ne Plus Ultra’ and ‘Triumphans’ are still found in cultivation.

From 1865 the great Italian explorer Odoardo Beccari was making his massive collections of plants in South-East Asia, among which he collected several notable rhododendrons. In Malesia (I, 1878) he described nine new species and put together a synopsis of the known species of this group up to this time. He listed 27 species in total from four islands, 23 of the species still stand today. Five were from Java, seven from Sumatra, 14 from Borneo and the first records from New Guinea, which included the superb R. konori Becc. now so well known and admired in cultivation for its enormous and beautifully scented, pale pink to white flowers.

In 1886 Vidal, a Spanish botanist, listed six species of Rhododendron in his revision De Plantas Vasculares Filipinas. Two species, R. apoanum Stein and R. kochii Stein had been recorded in 1883 with comment about their great potential for cultivation – a potential still hardly realized for the Philippine species. The first collection of a Vireya in the Philippines was made as early as 1839 by Hugh Cuming, a British naturalist on Mt Banahao. Cuming was noted for collecting living orchids for Loddige’s nursery but there is no evidence of his having collected any Vireyas as living material, but perhaps they failed to survive the difficult journey.

However, as the Victorian period came to a close the Vireyas were in decline. The limited genetic base of rather lowland species and rather unrealistic ideas about growing even these in very hot stove conditions meant fewer people troubled with them, particularly as there now came an enormous influx of new exciting hardy species from China and the Eastern Himalayas. Partly the Vireyas went out of fashion and partly they were squeezed out of the hothouses by tougher and even more gaudy orchids. They certainly could not compete in Britain with the new hardy Chinese rhododendrons, both species and hybrids, which were being grown more and more widely. World War I almost gave the coup de grace when ornamental horticulture went into decline with the shortage of manpower and conservatories everywhere being left abandoned and unheated. What, however, was rather surprising was that although the cultivation of these plants was in decline the number of species being described increased. In the 1890s, eight species were newly described; in the 1900s, 15 more species were described; but from 1910-19, 50 more species were described despite the ravages of World War I.

The next four decades saw only 45 more species names appear in the literature. Herbert Copeland, an American, produced a landmark account of the Philippine Vireyas in the Philippine Journal of Science (40: 1929, 133-79). He described five new species in a paper which enumerated 21 species of Rhododendron (20 of them Vireyas) and provided a
very workable account of the group. Another significant piece of work was that of Professor Holtum who was experimenting in the Singapore Botanic Gardens to produce good, free-flowering Vireyas that would be successful in the tropical lowlands. These were described in the Malayan Agricultural/Horticultural Magazine in 1939 (pts 9 & 11). Using the local species, especially *R. longiflorum* Lindl., *R. jasminiflorum* and *R. brookeanum* Low ex Lindl. (all of which can occur at sea level in the tropics), he was raising plants of great promise when the work was curtailed by the invasion of the Japanese in World War II. This work has never really been developed since within the tropics, and it is very sad that the most commonly encountered cultivated rhododendrons in tropical gardens are poorly growing azaleas. An effort has been made by John Swisher to grow low altitude Vireyas in Florida, but I know of no formal breeding programme to produce Vireyas which would flourish in the lowlands as Professor Holtum envisaged.

When Australia took possession of German New Guinea at the beginning of World War I the interior of the island was a great blank on maps. Very little penetration of this area occurred until a prospector found gold in 1929. Gold fever took over and exploration quickly followed. After that came missionaries and administrators, and plant collecting began as the mountainous area was opened up. An article by C R Stonor (*The Rhododendron Year Book*, 1951-2, 6; 48-51) gave a glimpse of what rhododendrons were to be found. He managed to bring back seed which germinated in the late 1940s at Edinburgh. A few of his plants still survive today.

A significant publication in 1949 was that of Professor Hermann Sleumer who, (*Bot. Jahrb. Syst.* 74(4) 511-33) in a ‘*Systema Generis Rhododendron* L.’ gave the first properly organized classification of the genus into subgenera and sections, including the Vireyas. It was a portent of his future contribution to the group.

Leonard Brass, who was responsible for the plant collections on the three large-scale and highly successful Archbold Expeditions to New Guinea culminating in that of 1938-39 to Mt Wilhelmina (G Trikora) and the Lake Habbema area, provided Professor Sleumer with abundant material of exciting new species. Professor Sleumer started work in the 1950s on a revision of *Rhododendron* for *Flora Malesiana* with the wealth of material that had accumulated and was rapidly being added to by the New Guinea Department of Forests. John Womersley, for many years Chief of the Division of Botany in New Guinea, took a particular interest in the genus, as did the Rev. Norman Crutwell, an Anglican missionary with a first class honours degree in botany. He spent a lifetime in New Guinea and was very active in the pioneer days (and up to the late 1980s). In the early 1960s Professor Sleumer published 122 new species of Vireya, the last great explosion in the size
of the genus *Rhododendron*. His account of the genus for *Flora Malesiana* appeared in 1966, the classic reference work, even today nearly 30 years on. It stimulated a great revival in Vireya growing, particularly in Australia, New Zealand and America, all countries where the species could, in selected places, be grown outdoors.

John Womersley, Norman Cruuttwell and Hermann Sleumer all sent living material, mainly the small light seed, to botanical establishments and enthusiasts in America, Europe and Australasia and the number of species in cultivation burgeoned. RBGE sent Paddy Woods and Bill Burtt to bring back new species into cultivation from the Malay Peninsula, Borneo and New Guinea, but much of the activity and interest in the group was moving out of Britain. There were Australians like Lou Searle, an agricultural extension officer for the Australian Administration working in the highlands, who took a fancy to the group and spent much of his leisure searching for Vireyas. He will be remembered for the exquisite *R. searleanum* Sleum. named in his honour but Searle also deserves mention as someone who strove to beautify the New Guinea highland roads and towns with plantings of the native species; both then and since his efforts were often unappreciated. More than once he had to rescue his plantings from the bulldozers as they were being swallowed up by unannounced road widening schemes, but he doggedly continued to grow, propagate and distribute plants from his highland base.

A collection of plants was being accumulated at the Strybing Arboretum in the United States and experiments in growing and hybridizing were being undertaken at Boskoop in The Netherlands from the new materials which were being sent out. But the greatest interest was growing in Australia and New Zealand, where people who had often seen the plants at first hand were returning from tours of duty in New Guinea. John Womersley in retirement from his post in Papua New Guinea led ‘Rhododendron tours’ which bred a band of enthusiasts in Australia and New Zealand. Graham Smith, the remarkable and energetic director of the Pukeiti Rhododendron Garden, collected many species and developed the group as a feature which stimulated much of the interest which is current in New Zealand today. Graham and Wendy Snell abandoned a solid livelihood growing camellias to invest everything in a Vireya nursery and became outstanding breeders of modern Vireya hybrids developing especially small-leaved plants with large flowers. Michael Cullineane similarly invested his heart as well as his money into a Vireya nursery in New Zealand; Clyde Smith wrote the beautiful introductory book *Vireya Rhododendrons* for the Australian Rhododendron Society (1989) and Os Blumhart, another nurseryman, went on to collect on his own account and has bred some amazing new hybrids compacting the growth with the use of the tufted cushion-like and aptly
named *R. saxifragoides* J.J. Smith. This difficult plant from the alpine bogs high in New Guinea has the ability to compact many of the flamboyant but straggly forms. Once in hybrid combination, they grow with true hybrid vigour showing none of the temperamental nature of the *R. saxifragoides* parentage.

Another major input was that of Paul Kores, an American funded by the Stanley Smith Foundation to collect and study Vireyas in Papua New Guinea over a four-year period with a special remit to introduce plants into cultivation. Many plants were distributed via the American Rhododendron Species Foundation and an account of high altitude Vireyas was published in P van Royen’s *The Alpine Flora of New Guinea* (vol. 3 1982 Cramer). It was a consolidation of Sleumer’s mainly herbarium-based taxonomy with more species being reduced to synonymy than were newly described, but it added considerably to our understanding of the wild populations of these plants. Others contributed in very different ways and it is impossible to mention everyone who has played a part in the development of the modern Vireya cult. Peter Valder collected on isolated forays into South-East Asia; his lively broadcasting and sharp mind have both entertained and stimulated many people. He gave a remarkable account of the collection of *R. aequabile* J.J. Smith from Mt Singgalang in 1974 following the travel instructions from a Dutch East Indies railway guide for 1910. This must rank as one of the most offbeat ways to use a railway guide: ‘the only significant difference to the journey as described,’ he remarked, was ‘that there were buses instead of horse-drawn carriages.’

John Rouse deserves special mention for a major contribution to the Vireya scene. A professional physicist he applied a sharp scientific mind, an eye for beauty and a very generous spirit to the group. He built up what was probably the finest collection of species and hybrids in cultivation in his garden in Melbourne where he can grow most of the plants outside. He developed the best seed-raising apparatus yet devised for these plants and made numerous hybrids, but he used this work to develop our understanding of the breeding systems often leaving others to register his best forms. He had grafted specimens both within and without Section Vireya and used this information to provide remarkable insights into the relationships of *Rhododendron*. He has published a great many papers, taken superb photographs, shown plants and helped scientists and laymen all over the world.

There are at least three ‘Vireya Buffs’ newsletters: *Vireya Venture*, *Vireya News* and *Vireya Vine*. The last is a tribute to the Education Committee of the Rhododendron Species Foundation and especially to the efforts and vigour of E White Smith, its editor. He persistently asks, persuades and cajoles people to write all manner of news, thoughts, recipes, observations and anecdotes, and his energy in getting these
mailed all over the world has made this a truly international medium of communication. It has brought together very diverse people in very different places – growers, nurserymen and scientists – and is a must for all who take a serious interest in the group. Another of the Americans who should not be forgotten is Bill Moyles who, working on behalf of the American Rhododendron Society, has patiently cleaned, packeted and tested seed, sending out many thousands of packets and has certainly been important in spreading these plants to diverse collections all over the world. The vulnerability of all plant collections if they are maintained only in one place cannot be overstressed and it is a tribute to the fraternity of Vireya growers that so many species are quickly spread around. It takes dedicated work to do this on a large scale.

The present situation is that Vireyas are having another vogue period, albeit largely outside the United Kingdom. The RBGE achieved a gold medal at the March show of the RHS in 1992 followed by the Rothschild Challenge Cup for an exhibit of Vireya species. Currently it has probably the largest list of species in cultivation in any one collection. The cool summers give Edinburgh an advantage over many more southern areas for growing these plants under glass, but the real interest is in areas where they can be grown outside. There is virtually no hybridizing going on in Britain at present and very few of the plants are commercially available here. In contrast Australia, New Zealand and America are producing exciting new forms which are more vigorous, more compact and free-flowering with a range of habit, colour and perfume to suit most plant-lovers’ tastes. They also have several specialist nurseries to cater for enthusiasts. There is potential for these plants to be grown in Britain: they require relatively little heat and flower throughout the year, but they do not take kindly to living-room conditions. The big challenge for the future is to develop a Vireya garden within the South-East Asian area from which they come. This must be done with care as where species are moved they could so easily hybridize with wild populations and play havoc with indigenous species. However, if an accessible, well-maintained garden can be found in an isolated mountain area without its own endemic species, this could prove a great attraction for rhododendron lovers and a site for further study. There is still enormous potential for the development of these plants. Many areas that do not already do so could grow them in the future, and there is unbounded potential for hybrids, given the species we already have in cultivation.

Dr George Argent, a tropical botanist at the RBG Edinburgh, has spent several years working in New Guinea on the local flora. He has made many field trips collecting Vireyas and is now working on the Ericaceae of the Malesian region.
Figure 9 (top left): the Vireya R. jasminiflorum was first exhibited in 1850. The strangeness of the flowers led to a comment that it was 'probably no Rhododendron at all' (see Chapter 7). Figure 10 (top right): R. 'Humboldti', one of TJ Rudolph Seidel’s cold-hardy hybrids (see Chapter 9). Figure 11 (above): Borde Hill, the Sussex garden of Colonel Stephenson Clarke, a prominent member of the original Rhododendron Society (see Chapter 15)
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