

Rhododendron laetum - Collection and Distribution

Brian Clancy

From 'The Rhododendron'
Journal of the Australian Rhododendron Society
Volume 30, Spring 1990

Some confusion exists concerning the collection of *R.laetum* in the wild. However, there is no doubt that all the material of this species was collected in the wild by Dr. H. Sleumer and his colleague W. Vink between January and February 1962, and that this is the only collection extant in the western world. The second expedition of the National Herbarium, Leyden, commenced in New Guinea in May 1961. I had written to Dr. Sleumer at Leyden unaware that he was already in New Guinea. My letter was onforwarded to him and he replied on 14 November 1961, that the expedition had come almost to its end and that all the seed had been distributed to growers at San Francisco and Seattle. The expedition concluded in December 1961, when Dr. Sleumer's colleague Dr. P. van Royen returned to Holland. Dr. Sleumer was then invited to join an expedition to the Arfak Mountains, Vogelkop Peninsula, Dutch New Guinea organised by the Forest Authority.

It was then the middle of the rainy season, and the political situation had deteriorated because of the presence of Indonesian troops around the south coast of the Vogelkop Peninsula. However, a Geological Research Group has just completed the establishment of a series of camps in the Arfak Range for the purpose of search and examination in the upper part of the Range and their Director provided Dr. Sleumer and Vink with two of his helicopters for transporting themselves and 750kg of equipment.

On January 8, 1962, Sleumer and Vink were flown from Ransiki, on the coast, over the 2300m high outer edge of the Arfak Range direct to a landing spot

near the Anggi-Gita lake at a height of 1840m. Earlier botanists such as Gjellerup (1912), Gibbs (1913), and Kostermans (1948) took three to four days to make this journey which the helicopters completed in 12 minutes. Suddenly the botanists found themselves in the midst of a wonderful mountain world with a beautiful climate but without carriers. Fortunately however, the Police Chief at Ransiki had sent two policemen, together with some native carriers to the area in advance and they had obtained local natives as carriers. Sleumer and Vink stayed 13 days at this camp which they called "Northpole" because it was much colder there compared with the lowlands. They collected locally and on those mountains which were within a day's walk. In the swamplands of peat bog they found *R.laetum* in bloom and seed. To collect *R.laetum* it was necessary to go ankle to knee deep into the mud whilst the plants were absolutely exposed to the full sun. Here *R.laetum* was a small, bushy plant 1 - 2 metres high. The blooms had pure yellow petals when they opened, becoming suffused with red, orange or salmon in the later stages when fully out. Propagation material of this species was very plentiful at this location.

On January 22 they walked for seven hours along the shore of lake Anggi-Gita, over Trigada and thence to the point where the River Dwons entered the lake. After crossing the river on a swaying bamboo bridge they climbed through a deep morass for a further two hours to Iray. The only thing that cheered Dr. Sleumer out of his depression was the sight of *R.laetum* which was flowering freely throughout the swamp. Near Disrebei, at 2500m, they saw the white flowers of *R.konori* and the yellow flowers of *R.laetum* together with their many hybrids growing side-by-side in open spaces in the forest. The flowers of these hybrids were pale yellow, pink and salmon red, and the plants were bearing large seed-pods. On January 28, they again climbed to the north-east part of Koebre and then to the Tembruk Peak (2500m). During this trip they stumbled on a spot where the pink *R.asperum* and the yellow *R.laetum* were growing side-by-side, with their salmon coloured hybrids. On January 29, both Sleumer and Vink were flown out by helicopter to Ransiki

and from there they flew along the coast to Manokwari, the luggage arriving by boat two days later.

Seeds of *R.laetum* were received by myself from Dr. Sleumer in early February 1962, with the following packing slip: "*Rh.laetum* J.J.Smith, Arfak Mts, Anggi Gita Lake, near bivouac 'noordpool', 1840m, in swamp, 8-1-62. leg. Sleumer. Common. Shrub, 1 - 1.5m, much branched, few stemmed. Corolla pure deep yellow first, becoming orange at lobes in later stages. Showy."

I sowed a small portion of this seed and then gave the bulk to our Foundation President, Mr. Alf Bramley. Mr. Bramley sowed half of this bulk and obtained a good germination. The remainder of the seed was held until September by a propagator who lived in a frost pocket and because of this delay the seed did not germinate.

In the Yearbook 1965 of the (German) Rhododendron Society, Bremen (Jahrbuch der Rhododendron Gesellschaft, Bremen 1965) in an article on "Tropisch-Malesische Rhododendron Boskoop", F. Sneider of Boskoop wrote that *R.laetum* flowered (for the first time) in Boskoop in February-March 1965. The seed of *R.laetum* was collected by Dr. Sleumer at 6,000 feet (1840m) at Lake Anggi-Gita in the Arfak Range in NNW-New Guinea, and sown by us in February 1962. Despite the strong growth of the seedlings we did not expect flowers so soon. The waxy corollas are pure deep-yellow at the commencement of flowering, and about 2 1/4 inches long (5.5cm).

R.laetum first flowered in Australia in 1966. Fortunately for myself, I was able to produce a plant in flower of *R.laetum* for exhibition at the Annual Show held at Olinda on Cup Weekend in November 1966. This exhibit won for me 'Best plant in the Show' and the coveted 'Award of Merit'. The very showy pure golden yellow truss of *R.laetum* was the centre of attraction and was the most photographed flower in the Show. The demand for plants of *R.laetum* was



insatiable. The Ladies Auxiliary rounded up every available seedling including a large number from myself and all were snapped up as soon as they reached the stall. The coloured photograph of *R.laetum* was featured in two national magazines and also on the cover of the March 1967 issue of 'The Rhododendron'.

This wide publicity created a demand for seed of *R.laetum* from all over Australia and from many overseas countries. At the time I was Secretary of the Society's Technical Sub-Committee and one of the requests for seed was from Strybing Arboretum, San Francisco. This request was filled in late 1967 when a large quantity of seed of *R.laetum* was sent to Strybing Arboretum. The covering letter also included details of the original collection details and this is probably where the confusion arose. The following year a request was received from Strybing Arboretum for cuttings of *R.laetum*. These were supplied from my plants and I had no trouble in obtaining a health certificate from the Quarantine Department, Melbourne. Subsequently, the Propagator, Strybing Arboretum, complained that all the cuttings had flower buds and, in reply, it was stated that these were the best and easiest cuttings to strike; simply remove the flower bud to facilitate multiple growth from the base of the cutting. Apart from seed which was sent to growers throughout Australia and many other countries, I also gave 16 advanced cutting grown plants of *R.laetum* to the Society for onforwarding to Mr. K. Wada of Japan. It is

pertinent to note that all the plant material of *R.laetum* distributed by the Australian Rhododendron Society originated from seed collected by Dr. Sleumer on January 8, 1961.

Also of particular interest to Vireya growers is the collection of *R.phaeocephalum* and *R.zoelleri*, seeds of which were sent to me as indicated in Figure 1.

Seeds of 2 Rhododendron
species collected on my last
trip by helicopter to the Mt. Mafak Mt.
Vogelkop Peninsula, Dutch New Guinea
on Feb. 7, 1962 at WARDORI
River, 1350m, in swampy soil
on clay with ferns, Lycopodium etc.
The day after Dr. Sleumer
returned to Manokwari,
one of the helicopter pilots
arrived with a large bunch
of pink and white
rhododendrons which he
collected at an emergency
landing strip high above
the Wardori River. Dr.
Sleumer recognised these
as *R.phaeocephalum* and
R.zoelleri and their
hybrids. He just had to
see them in their natural
habitat so two days later
he and the Chief of the
Forest Authority were
flown right to the spot in
20 minutes. They were
picked up 2 1/2 hours
later by a helicopter
returning from a supply
flight to a geologists' camp
nearby. The location was
an open, swampy place
overgrown with ferns,
encircled by forest and
located on a mountain
ridge 1350m high, which
was difficult of access.
Here they found the
usual yellow-orange form
of *R.zoelleri* and the
pure white to green-white
form of the same species
(Note that the "white"
form of this species has
not yet been found
elsewhere despite the fact
that *R.zoelleri* is one of
the most

Figure 1.

The day after Dr. Sleumer returned to Manokwari, one of the helicopter pilots arrived with a large bunch of pink and white rhododendrons which he collected at an emergency landing strip high above the Wardori River. Dr. Sleumer recognised these as *R.phaeocephalum* and *R.zoelleri* and their hybrids. He just had to see them in their natural habitat so two days later he and the Chief of the Forest Authority were flown right to the spot in 20 minutes. They were picked up 2 1/2 hours later by a helicopter returning from a supply flight to a geologists' camp nearby. The location was an open, swampy place overgrown with ferns, encircled by forest and located on a mountain ridge 1350m high, which was difficult of access. Here they found the usual yellow-orange form of *R.zoelleri* and the pure white to green-white form of the same species (Note that the "white" form of this species has not yet been found elsewhere despite the fact that *R.zoelleri* is one of the most

widespread and much collected species throughout New Guinea). The plants of *R.zoelleri* were growing next to the pure white form of *R.phaeocephalum* with its carnation scented flowers. Their hybrids had light to very light pink flowers with 5 and 6 petals to the corollas on the same specimen.

The resultant seedlings from this collection of seed of *R.zoelleri* and *R.phaeocephalum* were distributed by the Australian Rhododendron Society. Subsequently, the next generation seeds of this collection of *R.zoelleri* were distributed far and wide including some to Strybing Arboretum where one of the resultant seedlings was named *R.zoelleri* 'Golden Gate'. From a tray of some 300 seedlings of this collection of *R.phaeocephalum* a natural hybrid appeared and was named 'Dr. Sleumer' by Mr. Tom Lelliott. One of the most outstanding of the *R.phaeocephalum* seedlings was exhibited by Mr. Jack Wilson at the monthly meeting at Camberwell Town Hall. This plant was absolutely covered in pure white flowers and filled the hall with a delicious carnation scent. Unfortunately, this magnificent plant was lost in an unusually severe frost and has not been replaced.

In conclusion, *R.laetum* has only been found in the wild in the Arfak Mountains, Vogelkop Peninsula, Dutch New Guinea. Even as Dr. Sleumer was collecting in this area in 1962 the Dutch were moving out and the Indonesians were moving in. Almost immediately the territory was annexed by Indonesia, renamed Irian Jaya and the border to New Guinea closed. Unfortunately, the area is very rich in rhododendrons.

Reproduced by kind permission of
The Australian Rhododendron Society

© A.R.S.