

Playing with names: *Rhododendrons lochiae* and *viriosum*  
and the dark side of taxonomy

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The 1996 issue of *The Rhododendron* carried an article by Bob Withers and myself detailing the story behind the recognition and naming of a new Australian *Rhododendron* species (Craven & Withers 1996). A twist to the story was that there were nomenclatural difficulties, as the plant conventionally known as *R.lochiae* was different to that to which the name *R.lochiae* at that time was tied. A proposal to conserve the name *R.lochiae* for the plant well known under that name was put forward in 1996 (Craven 1996). The two Australian species, *R.lochiae* nom.cons. prop. and *R.notiale*, were treated in a paper published by us in the same year (Craven & Withers 1996). There the matter might well have ended but happy endings are not always the case, as in this particular story.

Briefly, the proposal (Craven 1996) to conserve the name *R.lochiae* with a new type - so that the plant that is familiar to botanists and horticulturalists would not have to change its identity - was not supported by the committees responsible for the nomenclature of flowering plants<sup>1</sup>. This was in spite of the fact that to conserve the name would be a stabilising action and the international code governing plant nomenclature was established largely to optimise stability in names!!

Humans can become quite reactionary when their judgement and credibility is questioned and I did not want to devote several decades to battling 'the system' in the hope of a commonsense outcome. Hence, I reluctantly decided to describe the second species as new and consign the name *R.notiale* to

subordinate synonymy under *R.lochiae*. This was effected in 2002 and the second species given the name *R.viriosum* (Craven 2002).

The significance of this for the Australian Rhododendron Society in particular will not be lost on those familiar with the two plants. As all members know, the society's logo is an image of a *Rhododendron*, but the plant used is actually the new Australian species, *R.viriosum*, and not *R.lochiae*, as the depicted plant has been called in the past. But namewise, it is not all bad news for us. *Rhododendron viriosum* is a strong grower, at least most of the genotypes in general cultivation are, whereas the single genotype of *R.lochiae* that I'm aware of being in cultivation is only moderate as to its longevity in pot culture. The vigour of *R.viriosum* is passed on to the F1 progeny when it is hybridised and, together with the straight corolla tube, is a positive trait in the breeding arena. The epithet *viriosum* was selected as this clearly is a 'stud' plant, the epithet being derived from the Latin, *viriosus*: robust, strong.

The major issue for horticulturalists and botanists, however, is that with only a handful of exceptions, all references to *R.lochiae* in the published literature in fact are dealing with *R.viriosum*. This especially will be an ongoing problem for hybrids, as many crosses are grown in cultivation under hybrid formulas (e.g. [(*laetum* x *zoelleri*) x (*konori* x *lochiae*)]). For years to come, we will have situations in which '*lochiae*' is being used in one of two senses, either as *lochiae* sensu Mueller (Mueller being the botanist who named *R.lochiae*) or as *viriosum*. People are going to have to get used to thinking *viriosum* for pre-1996-2002 mention of *lochiae* and having to nut out what is meant by *lochiae* in the post-1996-2002 literature (i.e. does it mean *lochiae* or *viriosum*?). There will be no quick fix.

<sup>1</sup> Rather than becoming vengeful, we should recall the words, "forgive them, for they know not what they do".

## References

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