

" . . . with an elegant beauty"

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I have in my study as I write a Vireya species, *Rhododendron himantodes*, in flower. It is eye-catchingly beautiful and it has entranced both my family and our visitors. It is displaying 10 trusses each of 12-16 flowers and there are a further 9 trusses to come out which are partially open or at the bud stage. Here, I wish to investigate and record my views on whatever particular features have endowed this species with an elegant beauty.

*R.himantodes* is a small shrub endemic to Borneo. On Kinabalu, in Sabah, it is found at altitudes in the range 1400 to 2000m mostly growing as an epiphyte high up on tall trees. It has been described by Sleumer (1966), who included it in subsection Malayovireya and by Argent et al. (1988) in the book 'Rhododendrons of Sabah'. This book contains two close up photographs of the flowers and truss and on the back cover a photograph of the leaves and their arrangement. Here I will give a brief description of visible characteristics many of which can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure1. *Rhododendron himantodes*

As its subsection indicates, *R.himantodes* has a dense, frequently overlapping, covering of dark brown scales on stems, leaves and floral organs. The leaves are narrow and linear, like *R.stenophyllum* (sect. *Vireya*, subsect. *Euvireya*), but a darker green and more obviously scaly. They are arranged in open, spiralling pseudowhorls which frequently run together leaving no bare stem. The flowers are small and dainty, like those of *R.macgregoriae* (sect. *Vireya*, subsect. *Euvireya*), but a vivid white rather than yellow or orange. The corollas are 5-lobed with a pattern of dark contrasting scales on the back, rather like the pattern of scales on the rear of the corolla of *R.valentinianum* (sect. *Rhododendron*, subsect. *Maddenia*). The corolla is translucent, like fine porcelain, so that with illumination from the rear, the scale pattern, in low contrast, is visible from the front. There are 10 large red-brown anthers which stand out against the white corolla backdrop. When the flowers first open, 2 of the anthers are at the top of the flower with the remaining 8 equally spaced in the lower half. As the flower ages, the filaments bend so the anthers lie against the corolla and all, or all but one, of the anthers end up in the bottom half of the flower. In the centre of the flower, the ovary is distinctly visible with its dense covering of overlapping scales, but the style and stigma are a light greenish-yellow and do not stand out against the corolla background. The flower buds are patterned; their bud-scales being dark at the top where they are covered with the malayovireya type scales.

Overall, *R.himantodes* is visibly 3-dimensional. The stems are dark with scales and because the leaf area is low, the 3D arrangement of the stems and branches can be clearly seen. Like *R.macgregoriae*, the truss is highly 3D because the flowers are well separated due to their long pedicels. Altogether, the visible characteristics of this species display novelty: it is most unlikely that *R.himantodes* would be mistaken for any other *Rhododendron*.

I think the beauty of this species resides in the particular combination of its specific visible characteristics of stems, leaves, flower-buds and flowers, all with an open 3D arrangement and ornamented with scales, the ornamentation being particularly tasteful on the rear of the corolla where the scales are well

spaced. Its beauty is also influenced by its surroundings. While it is beautiful in my study or shadehouse and I suspect in an open Japanese style formal garden, in my overgrown and untidy garden beds full of compacted less elegant rhododendrons its impact would be considerably reduced. Because of the open 3D qualities of this species, it is difficult to fully display its beauty in a 2D photograph. Although a stereo pair of photographs can be taken, they are inconvenient to display effectively and it is not feasible to change the view except by taking further stereo pairs. Thus for the best effect the plant itself is required, and I recommend its cultivation.

*R.himantodes* is easily grown from seed, by root cuttings or by grafting but it is rather a slow grower. George Argent sent me seed from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh in 1986 and 1988, and I produced viable self-pollinated seed in 1990. I find a seedling takes about five or six years to come into flower. The plant I have just described was given to me by Graham Snell in 1988 and it is possible that he has more specimens of this species available. I have rooted cuttings without troubles but I took the precaution of scraping the scales from their stems before the wounding and hormone treatment. *R.himantodes* grafts compatibly onto *Vireya* hybrids or *R.'Fragrantissimum'* and grafting or taking cuttings produces more rapid development than growing on seedlings.

*R.himantodes* crosses with other small flowered *Vireya* species and in late 1990 I crossed with *R.macgregoriae* as the male parent. This F1 cross is likely to be betwixt and between its two parents and not an improvement on either, but an F2 cross may produce some beautiful and flamboyant hybrids more tolerant of neglect than the parental species. However, it is my opinion that no F2 will surpass the elegant beauty of *R.himantodes*.

#### References.

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