

The Vireya Venture

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Buttermilk – John Rouse hybrid

This issue of the Vireya Venture is dedicated to Dr John Rouse an outstanding Australian. I did not have the pleasure of knowing John personally but like many Vireya enthusiasts I have enjoyed the products of his work. His research on Vireya, freely shared gave intricate details of their biology often beyond my limited intellect's capacity, down to the very straight forward, though often elusive practical skills of propagation and cultivation.

John also produced many beautiful Vireya hybrids that grace ours (see above photo) other Australian and Overseas gardens. Some of these include gems like ; Australia Two, Buttermilk, Crinolette, Esprit-de-Joie, Our Marcia and Wattlebird. Dr John Rouse will be sadly missed by family, friends and Vireya enthusiasts alike , he has contributed much to society that lives on to give pleasure and benefit others.

Editor



In Memoriam

John Layton Rouse

Physicists, biologists, financiers and horticulturalists were among those gathered in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia on Wednesday 20 March 2002 to give thanks for the life of John Rouse and extend their sympathy to his family. Such was the diversity of his interests and achievements that John could well be said to have simultaneously led several full lives without appearing to stretch himself.

John was born on 21 April 1925 and grew up in Melbourne. He left school in 1943 and joined the Royal Australian Air Force where he was given training in the early radar technology of the time and, at the age of 18, was posted to a radar unit in north Queensland. Not content with only doing his bit in the armed forces, in his spare time John completed the three years of a university Mathematics degree so that upon discharge at the end of the war he was able to rapidly obtain his Honours degree. His strong interest in physical matters led him to complete a Master of Science degree in 1952.

Physics then dominated his academic work and John took the lead in the team that designed and built the world's first Variable Energy Cyclotron. His degree of Doctor of Philosophy was awarded in 1957 and then Dr Rouse joined the permanent staff of the Physics School of the University of Melbourne. John remained in Physics until his retirement. He was an outstanding academic and a good teacher and respected supervisor of graduate students.

John followed his father in becoming a trustee of the Baker Foundation, a philanthropic foundation that gives significant support to medical research at the University of Melbourne. [Such was his dedication to science and the advancement of knowledge that John gave his body for medical research.] John was influential in having the Baker Foundation broaden its scope into other biological areas and the Foundation is now a primary supporter of the Australian Research Centre for Urban Ecology, a centre that John played a key role in establishing.

His expertise in horticulture and science fitted him well for becoming a trustee of the Maud Gibson Gardens Trust, a trust which supports activities at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne.

In the 1960s John developed a particular interest in the genus *Rhododendron* and he became a specialist in sect. *Vireya* species, which thrived in his Toorak garden. Given his enquiring mind, perhaps it was inevitable that his passion for rhododendrons would become entwined with his curiosity. He kept meticulous records of the numerous experiments that he conducted into seed germination, potting media, hybridisation, grafting compatibility, and so on. His imaginative propagation units, perhaps best described as high-tech versions of Wardian Cases, have been adopted by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh, where they are known as "Rouse Houses". John's *Order of Australia* award was made in recognition of his contribution to horticulture.

John's personal academic world of physical science in the School of Physics underwent a metamorphosis as a result of his exposure to the intricate and often microscopic, structures found in plants and emerged as the Botanical Physics unit. In particular, he investigated phyllotaxis, the spatial arrangement of leaves and floral organs, and their initiation and growth on the primordium. Such studies have

relevance to crystallography and the development of new materials for use in semiconductors, etc.

The research collaborations that John developed with biologists in the university's Botany School were particularly productive. The team's investigations into pollen tube growth and fertilisation were conducted upon John's extensive collection of potted *Vireyas* and resulted in an impressive stream of published papers. While I have not enquired about John's publications in physics and mathematics, I am sure he would have been similarly responsible in publishing the results of his work. It is his extraordinarily prolific writing in the fields of horticulture and biology that is of concern to we rhododendrophiles. John was the sole or co-author of over 70 articles involving rhododendrons, over 30 of which are meritorious for their impact in their respective disciplines, mainly in the field of reproductive biology but ranging from grafting and seed raising studies to phyllotaxis. When editing and checking has been completed, a list of his *Rhododendron* publications will be accessible on the *Vireya* web site maintained by Chris Callard (URL: <http://www.vireya.net/>).

John was a philanthropist in his own right, contributing funds to provide study facilities for Physics students at the University of Melbourne and to support a research project on *Vireya* rhododendrons.

While this brief sketch of the life of John has mentioned his professional and horticultural activities, there was even more to the man than this. John was a great family man; his wife Clare and their four children, and their grandchildren, were very dear to him. Family skiing and camping trips, Royal Tennis and Lawn Tennis, music, and reading were some of the other important aspects of his private life.

John's generosity in sharing the results of his *Vireya* hybridising freely around the world, in giving cuttings from his plants to fellow enthusiasts, in suffering frequent visitors who came to learn about rhododendrons are evidence of the person within. His respect for others, friendliness, sense of humour, and honesty in discussions are qualities he demonstrated consistently. Visits to Melbourne were never complete without a visit to John Rouse; one came away with more than just scions of interesting plants.

Towards the end of his life, John was suffering from two serious conditions, Parkinson's Disease and Myelodysplasia, both of which he managed with courage and good humour. He never showed any bitterness at his grim situation and continued as long as he was physically capable in making observations and measurements of phyllotaxis, using the equipment he had constructed in his own well-equipped workshop. He died on 13 March 2002 after being in hospital for about a week.

His infectious smile, his incredibly twinkling eyes, and the goodwill that manifestly emanated from him, will be fondly remembered by his friends whenever they are out among *Vireya* rhododendrons.

Lyn Craven
Canberra, ACT
Australia

John Rouse--my friend

To me, John Rouse was a friend, a good friend and a valued friend. He was so easy to meet, to talk to, and listen to, that his title, Dr., never came into mind, and one could feel almost as an 'equal' with him. I stress 'almost' because whenever we met, I felt that I was sitting at the feet of the master. Sitting comfortably, I might add, but I was always learning something new.

I first met John, some 26 years ago, at a Rhodo. Soc. monthly meeting in Melbourne. A non event I might add, as a power black-out forced the meeting's cancellation, but not before a number of members had turned up, and I was introduced to John, Bob Withers, and the late Allan Raper. The three were discussing Vireyas. A new word to me, but thanks to John and Bob, in particular, the word vireya soon became common place.

My friendship with John was originally based on Vireyas, an important connection for me, but I realise that for John, just one of many facets of his roving and enquiring mind. Just the same, he always had time for me, and to talk to him was so easy. His infinite patience in explaining details of his many experiments and research was boundless. For instance, the seed raising cabinet, that he developed, the 'Rouse Cabinet', was a fascinating combination of ideas to facilitate seed germination and expedite Vireya seedling growth. I have found no one who could match John's success in vireya seed raising and seedling growth. His glass house, with the carefully devised temperature and humidity control, was an absolute treasure trove of interesting vireya Species and Hybrids. His thoughts behind his hybridising, never oriented towards commercialisation, were often mind boggling when he tested the bounds of what was physically and genetically compatible. John's research, using an electron microscope, into these barriers to pollination, I found fascinating, and this provided me with useful hints as to what to cross and what not to try, in my own work. John's patience and technique in hybridising the very small vireya species, I much admired, because I found such work very tricky, and so often I missed harvesting the seed as the very small pods opened and shed their seed so rapidly and unobtrusively, whereas John was obviously far more observant and systematic. John would wonder how tall a vireya would grow, and try to find out by tying one supporting stake on to another to steady a single stemmed 'Wattlebird' up to a great height. I never saw the results of that experiment written up! John also grafted many of the harder to grow and very small growing Vireyas, both Hybrids and Species, and researched what is the most suitable root stock with surprising results.

The Rouse garden was a wonderful place to wander in. Vireyas in every shape and size, most in pots, but some planted out, including on the nature strip. Only the tennis court was sacrosanct. I think the large R. konori that was growing in a raised bed just outside the back door must have been the envy of every Vireya enthusiast who saw it. I wonder if it is still there? The garage never had a car in it that I saw. It was John's research lab, full of filing cabinets, microscopes, work benches, photographic equipment and the like. John was a keen and talented photographer, as his well illustrated lectures and slide shows bore witness. His garage was also a potting shed, and since there was never a car in the garage, why leave the driveway clear? No reason, so the driveway was filled with potted Vireyas too! Only a narrow walking space down the length to facilitate watering.

John's more recent prolonged battle with ill health slowed him down somewhat, but his interest in plants and the garden, was there right to the end.

When Wendy and I moved to Queensland 14 years ago, contact was not as easy, but John was always ready for a chat on the telephone. However, we both missed his delightful sense of humour and the warmth of the welcome, which was always part of our visits to John and Clare's. Any visit to their home usually ended up in the den with a sherry! To us, John will always remain one of this world's true gentlemen, in every sense of the word.

To my mind, an important aspect of friendship is sharing, and that is what John did. He shared his time, his knowledge, his Vireya seed, seedlings and cutting material, also his garden. There always seemed to be time. John's lectures for the Rhododendron Soc. were always full of interest, very well structured, humorous and inspiring. In fact, inspiring or encouraging could sum up what John's friendship has meant for me. After every contact with John I left feeling inspired, never discouraged. How I envied his university students!

I feel I am very fortunate to have had John as a friend. I am sure there are many, many others who must feel the same.

GRAHAM SNELL