
The Vireya Venture

Issue No. 65 September 2007

Editorial

We like living in Melbourne, Australia, for several reasons. First, because we have jobs here which give us money to indulge our hobbies and interests, including the enjoyment of Vireyas. Second, because we have reasonable access to our families in Sydney and Perth and can do things with them and enjoy their company.

Third, because the environmental conditions here are comfortable – although it gets hot in summer and cold in winter, its not too hot or too cold. We recently spent a weekend in central Victoria, which is the Australian State in the SE corner of this continent of which Melbourne is the capital, doing a tour of some wineries there. They produce some truly beautiful red wines in central Victoria and we went to collect our annual allocation from the Wild Duck Creek Vineyard.

The nights were absolutely freezing (literally – the dogs' water bowls froze solid) and we marvelled at how much more comfortable it was back in the city. We often refer to the area around Melbourne as "the soft wet underbelly of Australia" because conditions here are less extreme and considerably less harsh than in many other places in Australia.

The fourth reason is that Melbourne affords us the opportunity to participate in 'community living' and to make contributions to the ways in which many people live. We are participating in a 'sustainable living in the City' program being run by the Melbourne City Council and recently have taken something of a lead in changing to lower power consuming lighting throughout our building, in reducing waste going to landfill and in recycling.

Although still expensive, a wider range of low power LED (light emitting diode) light bulbs is becoming available in Australia and we are testing them at home to assess their suitability. LED downlights with power ratings of 1, 3 and



Buttermilk x R. Robert Bates. The flowers are large and of a clear bright yellow colour.

6 watts are finding useful applications where previously we used 60W incandescent or 50W halogen lamps. They will help reduce the amount of greenhouse gasses we are responsible for releasing into the atmosphere.

We are also having built a new 'one-way compost bin' which we hope will be suitable for compositing vegetable scraps produced by apartment dwellers. Its principal feature is that it's a one-pass system occupying very little space and not requiring mixing or messy turning to produce a compost that will be beneficial to our gardens.

The most recent development is a call by the Melbourne City Council for citizens to submit ideas towards a 'Future Melbourne Initiative'. Good ideas can become part of a long-term plan to ensure the city remains a vibrant and enjoyable place to live. We have not yet finalised our submission but it will be along the lines of building more 'secret gardens in the city' – a theme that Graham wrote about for the last Aust. Rhodo. Society's Journal.

The idea is to find suitable places (probably located in unsuspected places and hence hidden) where small gardens can be set up that will be the responsibility of a group of local

residents. We feel that Vireyas will be very suitable plants for some of these places for reasons that are obvious to many of you – small size, frequent flowering, suitable for small garden beds, easy to manage.

The biggest and most likely problem is that Vireyas may be too attractive and be stolen for private gardens in the suburbs. There are ways to reduce/avoid this problem but at least its one way to 'spread-the word' and expand the enjoyment of Vireyas among the public.

We wonder if any of our readers have ever tried to introduce Vireyas into public gardens around their cities, towns and suburbs and what your experiences were. I know there are some public zoos where vireyas are planted, eg Adelaide and at Hilo on Hawaii. Are there any situations where Vireyas are not suitable for public gardens?

The number of contributions to T V V has reduced to an almost imperceptible trickle, so please write and let us know what you are doing with Vireyas. And please send photos.

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R. aequabile at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. Photo from Chris Callard's website www.vireya.net

Eds. This Vireya species is not well-known. The following comments about it are taken from the Fall 2006 edition of the Vireya Vine produced by E White Smith (www.rsf.citymax.com/page/page/3831671.htm) which was reprinted from the 1983 edition:

From Stan Eversole, M.D, Palo Alto, South of San Francisco, California October 6, 1983

Dear Vireya Vine,

I like Rhododendrons with character and with that in mind I want to discuss one of my favorites, namely, *R. aequabile*, which I raised from seed collected by Dr. Peter Valder in Sumatra. It is so scaly that the leaves are almost chocolate brown. It is so temperamental that it has to be grown in the loosest and airiest media; for me, very coarse osmunda fiber. No plastic pot for this temperamental one, but a pulp pot with multiple holes in the sides and chunks of broken up styrofoam blocks in the bottom for drainage and air at the base.

When watered it receives Peter Schick's "prescription" of very dilute high phosphate but complete fertilizer with trace elements. Then it is happy and is so characteristic that one can recognize it at a glance. The flowers are orange-yellow, about 2 inches across, 2-3 to a truss. I have distributed many seed and seedlings because it is a rare plant hereabouts.

Dr. Stan Eversole

(E White added: Stan Eversole was the source of our good *R. aequabile* at Bovees).

Follow-up Email from Graham and Wendy Snell, Highfields, SE Queensland

June 2007

Dear Graham and Janet,

Guess what! It is another rainy day here!!!

I am enclosing, as an attachment, a photo I took yesterday of a new seedling cross, "Bob's Crowning Glory X Gardenia Affin." The seedling is quite small (and weak), but if I can get it to grow more vigorously, I suspect it will have some potential. The bloom has a light scent, as would be expected from it's parentage.

I am really sending it just to prove to you that I really am still growing Vireyas and to prove to myself that I can handle this computer. Is this the form and size you like to receive photos in, or is it better in the actual text?

Thanks for printing my previous, rather lengthy, letter. I have already received a telephone response from Griffith, N. S. W.

While re-reading your Issue #63 of T V V from last February, I realised I had overlooked the



*Graham Snell's new hybrid:
R. Bob's Crowning Glory x R. Gardenia Affin.*

offer of seed of *R. konori*. Do you still have some? Also, do you know the origin of this particular strain? I do not have *R. konori* growing these days, and I would like to give it another go, if possible.

I was interested in your comments on Vireyas with red or reddish brown leaves. Several of my hybrids could fit this description in varying degrees. I have not worked out yet where this characteristic has come from, but it certainly can make the shrubs stand out, even when not in flower.

Just to set the record straight. In my previous letter to T V V, I listed the elevation of Highfields as being 1000m. I got that wrong. It should have been about 750m above sea level. Still twice as high as we were in Maleny, but I got my mental arithmetic all wrong.

Best Regards, Graham and Wendy Snell.

P.S. I have just added a picture of our two dogs, Pepe and Asuta. Neither show editorial abilities, but Pepe, the little one, is showing talent at producing plant holes.



Eds. Thanks Graham for the photo of the beautiful flower of the seedling from the cross *R. Bob's Crowning Glory* x *R. Gardenia Affin*. Both parents are outstanding in their own right and this seedling certainly looks to have inherited many good points. And thanks also for the photo of your two dogs – sorry, your gardening assistants!

Graham and Wendy, you ask in your email about the origin of the particular strain of *R. konori* that we advertised as having seed for distribution in T V V #63 earlier this year. Well, its origin is complicated and it's a longish story. But we think its a story that is worth telling. The answer emerges from the article that starts on the next page titled: 'Travels of a Mythical Spirit God'. We hope you like this story and that it gives you the information you want.

A Short Email from Jay Murray

March 2007

Graham and Janet,

Many thanks for sending *The Vireya Venture*. It is a fine newsletter with lots of information that is particularly useful to me.

Many growers do not bother to register plant names, but everyone wants to know the parentage and characteristics of particular plants. I record as much as I can in our database for future reference.

I must admit that I turn to the last page first. Buster and YumYum are at least as engaging as the vireyas!

Best wishes, Jay Murray

Eds. Thanks for the nice words Jay. The issue of registering vireya hybrids is one that is on our minds at present as we have several plants that we think are worthy. As an exercise it might be instructive for us to write an article about how to go about registering a vireya hybrid for a future issue of T V V. We will keep it in mind.

Having cute dogs is a real blessing. Graham and Wendy Snell's two dogs, in the photo opposite, look like they are prominent members of their family. Our two, Buster and YumYum, are sitting on our feet under the desk as we try to put this newsletter together. They just have to be as close as possible.

Cheers, Graham and Janet

Travels of a Mythical Spirit God

By Graham Price,
with grateful contributions from Graham Snell
and Lynn Craven

The following is a story. I think it is true and correct, but maybe it isn't completely true. It's a compilation of smaller stories that are definitely true. Either way, it's still a good story.

The story is about the travels of one form of the vireya rhododendron species *R. konori* which is named after the spirit god Konor, a semi-mythical leader of the Hatam tribe in New Guinea (Argent, 2006, p88).

R. konori was first described by the Italian explorer Odoardo Beccari in 1878. Argent (2006) states that *R. konori* was introduced into cultivation in the 1960s by the Dept of Forests in Lae and later from several expeditions by collectors and enthusiasts. However, Sleumer (1963) states that he and Pieter van Royen collected *R. konori* and other species from Mt Sensenemes (2760m) and Mt Gwamongga (2570m) in the Arfak Mountains on the Vogelkop Peninsula in Dutch New Guinea 1962 and that: "*R. konori* grew here in the thousands, particularly in those parts which had been burnt by man-made fires. The biggest flowers were 16cm overall, and these occurred frequently at heights above 2500m, whereas at lower altitudes they were somewhat smaller. Possibly this increased flower size is due to the moist atmosphere prevalent on the cloud-covered peaks. The majority of the *R. konori* propagation material which was later sent to interested parties came from these peaks."

R. konori is distributed widely across the island of New Guinea, from the Arfak Mountains on the Vogelkop Peninsula in the far west of Irian Jaya, through the main central ranges of the island to southeast Papua New Guinea, to Fergusson Island, New Britain and New Ireland.

According to Argent 2006, *R. konori* is "Epiphytic in montane forest or terrestrial at forest margins and other open areas on burned open summits, also on peat bogs, swamps or marsh.". Many forms exist, from pure white, white with deep pink markings, to pink and

to dark red and it is often sweetly and powerfully scented. Photos of some of the different forms can be found on Chris Callard's website (www.vireyas.net).

R. konori first appeared in Australia in 1964 when Brian Clancy obtained seed of several vireya species from Prof Hermann Sleumer in Holland. Brian donated some of the seed to the Australian Rhododendron Society (A.R.S.) and, together with seed supplied by Rev Norman Cruttwell, it was raised by Alf Bramley, the Society's first president, and Tom Lelliott.

In those early days pretty much all vireya seed that was received in Melbourne was grown on by Tom Lelliott as he was the most skilful grower at that time. Vireyas were regarded as being too tender by growers around the Dandenong ranges who concentrated on the temperate rhododendrons and azaleas from England and North America. The plants (*R. konori*; *R. arfakianum*; *R. inconspicuum*; *R. laetum*, and *R. lochae* (Sp)) were advertised for sale (only one of each) to members in the Society's Journal (Vol.4, No.1 March 1965) for the price of £1.10, plus 2/6 postage.

Now another facet of the story begins. In the 1960s, there was an expedition to PNG by a group of Aust. Rhodo. Soc. members led by the late John Womersley, Chief of the Division of Botany, New Guinea Dept of Forests. John arranged for a group of Forestry workers who were heading off to the Finisterre Mountains, to collect seed of *R. hellwigii*, of which they claimed to know the location.



R. hellwigii is named after Franz Hellwig, Botanist of the German New Guinea Comp. and head of the Kelana Station in 1888 in *Kaiser-Wilhelmsland* – the former name of Papua New Guinea. Hellwig conducted an expedition into the Finisterre Mtns in 1888 with Hugo Zöller, a German journalist after whom *R. zoelleri* is named. In that year and the next he also conducted other expeditions with David Burke, a plant collector for Messrs VEITSCH & Sons.

During the trip led by John Womersley, the A.R.S. members offered some finance for the expenses of the Forestry workers. In due course seed was received by John and he sent it on to the Aust. Rhodo. Soc. in Melbourne. There was more than one packet of seed but they were all labelled as *R. hellwigii*. The seed was shared around among members and it is likely that some was given to Tom Lelliott to raise. All of the seed that was raised turned out to be *R. konori* and not *R. hellwigii*.

In the early 1980s Tom Lelliott gave half his vireya collection to the National Rhododendron Garden (NRG) at Olinda, which in those days was run by the Aust. Rhodo. Soc. It is likely that Tom was getting ill at this time as a few years later he passed away. Among a range of vireya species and hybrids he gave to the NRG were two plants labelled as "Hellwigii A" and "Hellwigii B".

This was a strange discovery because it was not known that Tom had this species. Its introduction into cultivation was described by Bob Withers (1991) as: "*R. hellwigii* was collected in the Finisterre Ranges in 1964 by *R. Pullen*, but does not appear to have been introduced into cultivation at that time. It was later recollected in the Finisterre Ranges by *Paul Kores* in 1976. Seed from plants considered by *Paul Kores* to be midway between *R. hellwigii* and *R. superbum* was sent to us as *R. superbum*, but when the seedlings flowered they appeared to be *R. hellwigii*. Cuttings from plants which *Paul Kores* considered to be true *R. hellwigii* were successfully established in the United States."

The Director of the NRG in the 1980s was Peter Damman and he had a policy of planting vireyas throughout the garden along the banks of a creek with overhead trees. Many of those vireyas adapted very well and have put on a lovely show for many years. However, Tom's plants were all tall and straggly, well over 6ft

high, and didn't look good. They weren't acceptable for public exposure.

Peter did things in a rush in those days and was very keen on reinvigorating plants. So, in his usual way he immediately "gave them a haircut". He cut the tops off them all, down to about 2 ft high bare stumps, expecting them to shoot away and make nice thick bushes. He took a few cuttings to strike and planted the stumps in an out-of-the-way place somewhere. It's possible they were never seen again.

A few months later I found one struck cutting from each of the "Hellwigii A" and "Hellwigii B" plants in a plastic igloo shadehouse. They weren't doing very well, so I decided to give them some TLC at my home and try to keep them alive. They did move ahead somewhat and grew from small cuttings into small plants, but in those days I didn't have the facilities to give them proper attention and they became infected with rust.

The two plants needed some expert attention and my assessment was the Brian Clancy was the best plantsman I knew. So, at the next Aust. Rhodo. Soc. meeting I approached Brian and asked him to take the plants and wave his magic vireya wand over them. I asked that once he had them growing vigorously he would take cuttings and distribute them to other Society members. Brian smiled at me in a strange way but agreed to give them a go. I think that maybe he realised what they were from familiarity with Tom's vireyas but he decided to humour me.

I didn't hear any more for about a year then one day Brian phoned me to say he wanted to return the plants. He gave both plants back to me, but they were now 2-3 feet high and growing nicely. He also gave me copies of two pencil drawings to show what poor condition they were in when he got them and how much improvement he had made. I don't think Brian had distributed any cuttings to other members - I guess he thought that was now up to me.

In 1989 I moved to Perth on the western side of Australia and I took all my vireya plants with me, including the "Hellwigii A & B" plants. They were moved around different Perth suburbs and at times I was tempted to put them in the ground where I knew they would do best. Perth's climate is very hot and dry in summer and the best way to keep vireyas from suffering is to get them out of their black plastic pots and into the ground. However, for some reason I

didn't put them in the ground and they remained in pots.

I returned to Melbourne in 1996 and brought back most of my vireyas, including the "Hellwigii A & B", packed into a small trailer towed behind my car. The jolting of the trailer during the 4 day, 3500 km trip tossed most of the soil out of the pots, together with many plants. After that they again they needed TLC.

The plants then spent 2 years at North Ringwood and then about 7 years in black plastic pots on benches out at La Trobe University in Bundoora, both outer northeast suburbs of Melbourne. They had overhead watering and shade cloth protection but it wasn't ideal. The "Hellwigii A" plant grew to about 1m tall and flowered once. When I showed this plant and flower to Bob Withers he said that he had always known this to be *R. konori*. The "Hellwigii B" plant was somewhat smaller and never flowered.

It is not certain, but it is likely, that these two plants raised by Tom Lelliott were from the seed sent by John Womersley collected in the Finisterre Mountains of PNG in the early 1960s. The different collections of seed had been wrongly labelled as "Hellwigii A" and "Hellwigii B". I subsequently re-labelled the two plants as *R. konori* TLA and TLB (standing for Tom Lelliott A & B).

In 2005 I planted both plants in a garden bed around our apartment block in Melbourne city and both are now doing very well.

The *R. konori* TLA plant is over 2m tall, is a little spindly but holding its own among other vigorous large vireyas and it flowers regularly. The *R. konori* TLB plant is about 1.2m tall and is more compact. It too flowers regularly. In the February 2007 edition of this newsletter (T V V # 63) I offered seed from *R. konori* TLA that I had selfed. The photo above is from when it flowered in July 2007. Because of a request I have again selfed this flower.

The *R. konori* TLA inflorescence is typically composed of 8 flowers, in an open to full umbel, the flowers horizontal to erect on very short pedicels. The whole truss is about 20 cm wide. Each flower is expanded funnel-shaped, about 10 cm wide and 9 cm deep, with 6-7 corolla lobes not overlapping to half overlapping and bi-symmetric across a vertical plane. The flowers are fleshy, pure white with deep pink spots at the base where each lobe separates from the tube. It has a sweet and strong perfume.

This story shows that the '*Spirit God Konor*' (or at least his plant symbol) has now travelled from its natural forest home in the Finisterre Mountains of PNG, through the hands of Forestry Dept workers and John Womersley, to Aust. Rhodo. Soc. Members and Tom Lelliott in Melbourne, Peter Damman, myself, Brian Clancy and back to me. It then travelled to Perth, back to the outer suburbs of Melbourne and finally to Melbourne CBD. I have now sent seed of it to Hawaii and Washington State in the USA and to Queensland. I wonder where it will go next?



Photo of *R. konori* TLA at its recent flowering.

A form of *R. konori* was named 'White Giant' by Lyn Craven. John Rouse crossed 'White Giant' with *R. leucogigas* 'Hunstein's Secret' and separately he crossed it with another form of *R. konori* known as "Irian Jaya", which presumably was from the Arfak Mtns on the Vogelkop Peninsula in New Guinea. A seedling from this cross was selfed by John, so the parentage is: *R. konori* Irian Jaya x *R. konori* White Giant (Selfed); which is still *R. konori*.

I have two mature plants from this cross and they are slightly different, one having small pink spots and the other pure white. The photo below shows the flowers of both plants. I recently 'back-crossed' these two plants, a seed pod is now developing

and the seed will go to be raised. I guess its parentage is: {*R. konori* Irian Jaya x *R. konori* White Giant, Selfed A} x {*R. konori* Irian Jaya x *R. konori* White Giant, Selfed B}, which again is still *R. konori*. If nothing else the resulting "species" plants should have some 'hybrid vigour'.



Two different flowers from the selfed cross
R. konori Irian Jaya x *R. konori* White Giant

References:

- Argent, G. 2006, Rhododendrons of subgenus Vireya. Royal Horticultural Society, pp381.
- SLEUMER, H., 1963, Rhododendron in New Guinea, Jahrb. Rhodod. Ges. 39, p. 7-32. (Translated from the German by A Ozolins in conjunction with B Clancy and J O'Shannassy).
- Withers, R.M., 1991, A History of the Introduction of Vireya Rhododendron Species into Cultivation in Australia. 'The Rhododendron' Journal of the Australian Rhododendron Society, Vol. 31, 1991 (copy included in the Website of Chris Callard at: www.vireya.net/archive-WithersAusJ91.htm)

Emails from Bill Hamm in Washington USA

March & April 2007

Email 1 Graham and Janet,

Good to hear from you. A lot has happened since we last communicated. My son installed a new computer for me and a new service, Comcast. I made the change just in time for MS to announce that they would no longer support Windows 98. I now have XP Pro and like it. However, the new service keeps shutting down and I lose all the automatic updates. I was unable to contact you for a while after I got this new computer as your address was not acceptable to my service.

I am planning to go down to the Rhododendron Species Foundation soon and pick up a few vireyas that they have. I have my outside plot ready and a warm spot available in the winter in our kitchen. I will close for now and thank you for your trouble in contacting me.

Bill

Email 2 Graham, Thanks for your last email. I am busy keeping up with things. I have had two major surgeries since we talked and at my age [83] I have not yet reached my old health. The operations were to correct a problem I had about 15 years ago. I had an emergency operation for an oesophageal hernia and another to install a screen, so I now have a built-in girdle. I can't lift as much as before but have learned to cope.

I found *R. konori* on the Species Foundation website. They have both *konori* var. *konori* and *konori* var. *phaeopeplum* available for sale. The vireya section is an addition to their website. It seems to have a broad interest with lots of input. I think I gave you the address: www.rhodygarden.org Just click on "vireyas". Do you belong to the ARS? I do and also to the Rhododendron Species Botanical Garden. The garden is south of Seattle so I don't get down there very often. It is a beautiful place.

Yes please - I would like to have some of the *R. konori* seed you are offering. I will buy a *konori* from the 'rhody garden' so I can compare them. I'll close for now and give you my address for sending the seed.

Bill

Email 3 Graham, Sorry about the delay in answering your email and your letter containing the packet of *R. konori* seed.

Have been visiting my eye doctor a lot. One eye is now working well and the other one will be fixed in a few weeks. I didn't realize that my vision was so poor. Of course my wife did - I think she knows more about me than I do. On April 13th we celebrated our 61st wedding anniversary with friends.

At this point I am researching vireyas on the web. I have just about decided to go three ways with the seed you sent: (i) I will grow some in the proven way that I have had good results with; (ii) I will try the terrarium style with seed raising on bark of Douglas Fir; and (iii) I will give some seed to Meerkirk Gardens where they have controlled seed raising conditions. I think you sent me enough seed for all of that.

I will microwave everything that goes into the terrarium, except the liquid fertilizer which I use for African violets. I have used that fertilizer to spray an orchid that was given to us a year ago and it lasted a year. I am sure that it was forced to bloom.

I read your recent letter in the VIREYA VINE and added it to my file on vireyas. I will keep you posted on my seeds and thank you much for sending them.

Bill

Eds. Thanks for the emails Bill. We are glad that you received the *R. konori* seed OK. It will be interesting to see what differences occur in the three ways you propose to raise the seed. We would appreciate being kept advised of how they progress. Also glad to hear that you are over your hernia operations and that your eyes are now working better. Hopefully you will reach your 'old health' soon.

No, we do not belong to the ARS (American Rhododendron Society). Maybe we should join but we have enough trouble keeping up with the local Aust. Rhodo. Soc. activities.

Please keep in contact Bill.

Cheers Janet and Graham

Vase of Mixed Vireyas

The photo below shows the winning entry in the General Exhibit at The Ferny Creek Autumn Show in 2006. As a vase of mixed Vireyas it looks pretty good, don't they! Ferny Creek is an outer eastern suburb of Melbourne, Victoria Australia up in the Dandenong Ranges at an elevation of about 400m.



Eds. The following is a message from Jose Almandoz who is moderator of the chat room Yahoo Group: Vireya. Go to the website (<http://groups.yahoo.com/vireya>) and sign up.

Email from Jose Almandoz, Spain

August 2007

Dear Vireya friends,
Just want to share with you a pleasant surprise. This plant I had grown from seed labelled as *leucogigas* 'Hunstein's Secret' (cannot recall provenance, but obviously was not what it said, or perhaps an unfortunate labelling mistake from my part?) quite a few years ago, and flowered this weekend as you see. BIG sweetly scented (vanilla-like) flowers of good, thick quality, although foliage is nothing extraordinary so far, I must say. Just wanted to show my baby.

Jose
Basque Country, Coastal Northern Spain



Jose Almandoz's recently flowered vireya.

Well, that's the end of another issue of The Vireya Venture. Issue # 66 will be produced and distributed in December.

Graham and Janet Price



Again, its goodnight from YumYum and Buster. Here they are doing what they do best – sleeping.