

Notes from a Plant Hunter's Diary

Vireya Collecting in the Wild

Keith Adams

from the Journal of the American Rhododendron Society

Volume 50, No.1, Winter 1996

I guess I saw my first vireya rhododendron when I worked for the New Zealand nursery of Duncan and Davies in 1950. It was *Rhododendron lochiaae*. Other than growing a few hybrids in my own garden in the intervening years, my first real contact with them in the wild was on Gunong (mount) Kinabalu in Sabah in 1980 on a one-man plant hunting expedition. I collected several species, viz. *R.fallacinum*, *R.stenophyllum*, *R.rugosum*, *R.ericoides*, *R.buxifolium* var. *buxifolium*, *R.crassifolium* and *R.lowii*, and sent the cuttings back to the Pukeiti Rhododendron Trust in New Zealand. All survived, but, "by cripes", they are difficult! I know of only one plant of *R.buxifolium* now living, and that is at Mark Jury's nursery - never seen it in flower in cultivation, but live in hopes. Similarly, from three cuttings of the big *R.lowii* in Paka Cave (refer to Dr.George Argent's book *Rhododendrons of Sabah*) only one survived at Pukeiti and it is yet to flower. We have taken wood and buds for propagation (it doesn't provide much), and Mark Jury has a few small plants. Incidentally, I grow all my vireyas outdoors - open ground here in New Plymouth. *Rhododendron lowii* grows into a decent-sized large shrub / small tree, and I believe Os Blumhardt (Whangarei, N.Z.) has one. Also someone told me they've flowered it in Australia. I would like to hear!



Rhododendron buxifolium

I carried on from G.Kinabalu to G.Mulu in northern Sarawak. I think I was the first to collect there after the Royal Geographic Society expedition in 1978 and was lucky, for not long after the state government declared Mulu a national park. Kinabalu has always been reasonably accessible, and now Mulu has been opened up to tourists. I would recommend it, not only for the flora but for what I am led to believe is the biggest limestone cave complex in the world. I collected *R.crassum*, *R.fallacinum*, *R.stapfianum*, *R.orbiculatum* (my favourite), *R.stenophyllum*, *R.durionifolium* and *R.yongii*. I think I was the first to introduce *R.yongii* to cultivation in this part of the world and have flowered it in my own garden - a very deep rich red.

After my initial expedition to Mulu I decided to make Sarawak my hunting ground and have been there nine times in the last twelve years, always alone except for my various guides and porters. Kinabalu and Mulu have been well botanized over the years - Dr. H. Sleumer seems to have gotten into most places, and Dr. George Argent is running him a pretty close second. However, there are other areas a bit more difficult but possible with some determination and a readiness to accept a degree of discomfort and risk. Nothing is achieved in this field without the above ingredients. You even get used to the leeches! Nearly "came to grief" a couple of times last time I was there. I love Sarawak - the people, food, flora and fauna and the general ambiance of the place, even to the extent of eating monkey, snake, padi snails, giant lizard, deer and wild pig. When I'm in the jungle I live as the natives do.

There's another mountain near G.Mulu in the north, G.Murud - both just over 8,000 feet. I collected on Murud in 1982 - more difficult than Mulu but not impossible. Fly to Bario from Miri. On Murud I collected *R.suaveolens*, *R.stapfianum*, *R.cuneifolium*, *R.fallacinum*, *R.acuminatum*, *R.stenophyllum*, etc. I'm getting to the stage I can't remember where I collected what - in spite of diary notes.



Rhododendron fallacinum

In recent years I've been to Batu Lawei a couple of times - half way between Mulu and Murud and only about 6,000 feet but still five days there and back from Bario. Bario is a village with an airstrip reached from Miri. You might have to wait in Miri for a few days for the weather to clear at Bario at about 3,000 feet. I've flown around there for an hour waiting for a hole to appear in the clouds to land. By the same token, I was cast in Bario for a week, waiting for the weather to clear to fly out. Fortunately they have a medical clinic so I was able to store my cuttings in their refrigerator. Even if you don't want to climb, anyone can collect *R.durionifolium* and *R.pneumonanthum* only half a mile from the airstrip along a flat track. And no worries about leeches!

For anyone contemplating going "jungle" to climb and collect it's necessary to get to the nearest village and then hire a guide and porter(s) to reach your destination. Don't worry about snakes - they get out of your way if you walk slowly, but leeches lie in wait for you. Leech socks can be obtained from the Malay Nature Society, P.O. Box 750, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, although I have heard panty hose are effective as long as they have no holes. Leeches will find any gap. On Bukit Lumut I collected 72 from my sneakers when we got back into camp, but leech socks let none through. The natives are not in

the least interested in vireyas - most don't know them and they don't like going high - "too cold" - yet at 6,000 feet its only temperate. The nights are cool - say, 16°C-18°C - but the days are hot - 32°C-35°C and humidity 95%. Batu Lawei is comparatively easy and Tamin Sabin is a good guide and bushman and is well known in Bario. Most of the rhodos you see grow terrestrially even though they are naturally epiphytic, e.g., *R.crassum*, *R.stenophyllum*, *R.orbiculatum*, *R.suaveolens*, *R.micromalayanum*, etc. On Batu Lawei I collected *R.orbiculatum*, *R.crassum* (I have yet to see the white form), *R.borneense*, possibly a new form of *R.bagobonum*, *R.micromalayanum*, *R.himantodes* (very difficult to grow on, though Mark Jury has some of my 1992 collections still alive). The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh has it growing in their collection (not open to the public, but Dr.George Argent, if you are lucky to find him, would, I am sure, show you through). I also collected *R.lanceolatum* - the only one I've ever seen growing in the dense jungle (cf. *Rhododendrons of Sabah*), and we now have it alive and well in New Plymouth. I might be the only one to have collected it and was pleased to have George Argent ask me for cuttings. They don't have it in Edinburgh, which surely has the most comprehensive collection of vireyas in the world. In the wild in Borneo it's not always easy to collect viable seed. You've got to be there at exactly the right time.



Rhododendron orbiculatum

Another place I've been - and nobody's been there before, I'm sure (even George Argent hadn't heard of it) - is Bukit Lumut, reached from a remote village on the Tenu Agricultural Scheme up the Rejang River in central Sarawak. Take off from Sibul by river express ferry, then walk. From the

village to Lumut and back was only three days but some of the hardest I've spent - rewarding though, for here I collected the best form of *R.orbiculatum* I've seen - six florets to the truss and a beautiful shell pink. The only other one was *R.durionifolium*.

In south Sarawak, right at the bottom and near the Kalimantan border is Bukit Puch, which has *R.variolosum*. Also easily reached from Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, are Bukit Serapi (get there by Land Rover) and Bukit Santubong (taxi, bus or private car), the latter a hard day's climb up numerous bamboo ladders, but at the top are *R.salicifolium* and *R.verticillatum*. Start off from the bottom at 6a.m. and you'll do it in a day - but you've got to be fit!

Now, if you don't care to go to Sarawak, fly to Kuala Lumpur in Peninsula Malaysia. Two hour's drive takes you to Genting Highlands, the huge tourist casino complex. But on various tracks from there you should find *R.jasminiflorum*, *R.scortechinii*, *R.malayanum* and one Irroratum Series *R.wrayi*. Another worthwhile destination is the Cameron Highlands, the market garden centre for all Malaysia, where you can go up Gunong Brinchang about 6,000 feet. Take a bus or taxi to Tapah and then transfer to another bus or taxi for Tana Rata or a couple of miles further on to the village of Brinchang. This is probably the easiest place, with the exception of the track at Bario, I have ever collected. As far as I know there is no restriction on collecting, and there is a sealed road to the summit where there is a TV repeater station. Take a taxi or hitch a ride to the top through market gardens and tea estates and then walk back down where you will see on the roadside banks starting at the top *R.perakense*, *R.wrayi*, *R.micromalayanum*, *R.malayanum*, *R.pauciflorum*, *R.jasminiflorum* and *R.robinsonii*. There might be others off the beaten track and there are no leeches!

I was in Sulawesi (Celebes) in 1992 on a reconnoitering visit. As far as I know nobody has collected there since Dr. Sleumer, and there are many possibilities for someone with more youth than I and a reasonably large budget. There's a high place near Ujang Padang, the capital in the south, several high points near Rantepaco in the Torajan Highlands, and high ground also away to the west of Manado in the north. There isn't a lot of

English spoken in Indonesia, so a knowledge of the language or an interpreter would be desirable.

In the wild vireyas seem to exist on the "small of an oily rag" but in a garden situation in New Zealand an NPK rhodo fertilizer gives good results. I use benlate for mildew and rust, but these diseases don't seem to appear in the wild. My experience tells me that the Borneo species are somewhat more difficult than the New Guinea ones to grow satisfactorily, and you seldom see a decent specimen in the wild. They're mostly pretty scruffy! For the newcomer to this wonderful new field of rhododendron culture, I would strongly recommend growing hybrids for a start. Hybrid vigor was never so apposite as for these plants, and there are some really gorgeous ones available these days.

Keith Adams, a nurseryman for 35 years, served on the executive board of the Pukeiti Rhododendron Trust in New Zealand for 25 years.

Reproduced by kind permission of the

[American Rhododendron Society](#)

© A.R.S.