

Rhododendron zoelleri

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Rhododendron zoelleri is one of the most brilliant and spectacular species of the whole genus. The large funnel-shaped flowers, lobed almost halfway, are brilliantly bicoloured, almost iridescent, yellow to orange or salmon, or with yellow tubes and lobes suffused with orange to orange-red. In flower, this species makes a spectacular and exciting display.

R.zoelleri is a Vireya species classified by Dr. Sleumer in Series Javanica, which contains eighty one species. It is widely and plentifully distributed throughout New Guinea, Irian Jaya, and extends to the Moluccas. *R.zoelleri* is found as a shrub or small tree. It is epiphytic in high forest, terrestrial in lighter forests and in cleared grasslands and road sidings. This species has been found at sea-level within metres of the sea, widely up to 1350 metres and rarely up to 2000 metres. Terrestrial forms have been found on poor sandy soil, in swampy soil, in clay with ferns and in secondary grasslands.

My knowledge of *R.zoelleri* is based on some fifty collections from the wild, and thirty one years experience in growing and flowering *R.zoelleri*.

Like all widespread species, these collections vary from the weakest to the strongest growers, and in size, colour and number of flowers. It should be kept in mind, particularly by species enthusiasts, that all species in the wild are seedlings.

Each seedling usually has twenty six chromosomes, each with an enormous number of genes. I must emphasise, therefore, that each seedling has its own

individuality. I first used this description, "separate individuality" of seedlings twenty five years ago and I am certain that it still applies.

The first plants of *R.zoelleri* raised in Australia were grown from seed collected by Dr. Sleumer on his last trip by helicopter to the Arfak Mountains, Vogelkop Peninsula (then known as "Dutch New Guinea"), Irian Jaya. The collection was made on 7 February, 1962, at Wardori River, at a site 1350 metres high in swampy soil or clay with ferns. This helicopter flight to the site at Wardori River traversed the route taken by Beccari in 1875.

The helicopter flight took less than twenty minutes, compared with five days hard slog by Beccari. Even as late as 1948, Dutch Botanist Kostermans took three and a half days from the coast to reach a lake in the Arfak Mountains. The entire collection trip from leaving and returning to Lae took Dr. Sleumer just three hours!

The flowers of *R.zoelleri* collected by Dr. Sleumer had the usual deep yellow tube with deep orange lobes becoming reddish at the last stages of blooming. It was from the second generation seed of the original collection sent from Australia to Strybing Arboretum, that the clone *R.zoelleri* 'Golden Gate' was named. This clone is sparse flowering, and like all the *R.zoelleri* from Wardori River, it is temperamental and difficult to grow. Notwithstanding these difficulties, it has produced some very good hybrids that are easy to grow and flower. One of the best of these has been named 'Veronica Maureen'. The white flowers of the cultivar are edged with reddish orange, whilst the centre is off-set with black-tipped stamens. It is a most attractive, easy to grow and flower hybrid that is highly recommended.

Probably one of the most free-flowering of all collections of *R.zoelleri* is that collected in 1967 at Baiyer River. A classic example of this collection is growing in the Illawarra Rhododendron Park at Wollongong, N.S.W.. According to Mr. Bill Mearns, this specimen, just eleven years old, flowers three to four times each year. Each of these flowerings have up to twenty

trusses, the flowers of which have the pure yellow tube whilst the lobes are of vivid tangerine-red. This is a very showy rhododendron and is typical of the best Vireyas when they reach maturity.

R.zoelleri 'Island Sunset', was raised by the late Mr. Don Stanton from seed collected on Goodenough Island. 'Island Sunset' was registered in 1972, with nine flowers per truss, and has a deep yellow throat deepening to fire-red on the lobes. It has a glowing iridescence and is a very showy Rhododendron. Generally, 'Island Sunset' has proved to be a slow grower and slow to flower. Seedlings from 'Island Sunset' have proven to be easier to grow and easier to flower, with no appreciable difference in the flowers.

'Island Sunset' was hybridized with pollen from *R.brookeanum*, and from this cross an outstanding seedling has been named 'Kiandra'. This cultivar has trusses of seven to fourteen flowers in a vivid orange-red colour. It is brilliant in sunshine and is iridescent, or glows, on dull or overcast days. It is easy to grow and it flowers early in life; it is not unusual to have three flowers when only eight inches high.



Rhododendron zoelleri (Michael Black)

Without any doubt, the best form of *R.zoelleri* is the cultivar selected by Michael Black from the large number of plants in full bloom on a bank near

Aregen. Cuttings from the selected best two from Aregen were received by the Australian Rhododendron Society. The super No.1 cultivar was housed in the glasshouse in the Olinda Rhododendron Gardens, it was covered in thirty three flower buds when it was pruned by a first year apprentice gardener and the prunings were dumped on a rubbish bonfire. After pruning, no leaves were left on the remaining stems and the plant soon died. Fortunately, I was able to rescue three cuttings from the fire and have flowered and hybridized this superb variety.

Selection No.2 was given to the late Mr. Arthur Headlam, he gave cuttings to others, but on his demise, the original plant has been lost.

Michael Black first collected Vireyas in New Guinea in 1965. From the time he arrived at Lae in April until he left in June, he had dug up and despatched to the U.K. via Trans Australia Airlines, three lots of live plants with the soil attached; the third consignment contained two hundred plants!

He again visited New Guinea in 1968 and one thousand live plants with soil attached were transported in tea-chests and wooden boxes to the U.K.; many arriving within six days of leaving New Guinea. Notwithstanding, most of these Vireyas were eventually lost. Probably the worst disaster being encountered at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh, where two glasshouses were devastated with infection by fungi in the soil adhering to the roots.

Dr. Sleumer and others have said that this devastation "was really something to see". The R.B.G., Edinburgh, lost most of their Vireyas, and the two glasshouses had to be disinfected and fumigated.

Probably the best hybrid with *R.zoelleri* (Michael Black), is the hybrid R.'Dr.Sleumer' x *R.zoelleri* (Michael Black), which has been named 'Zoe Elloise'. This hybrid first flowered in 1986 with five trusses, each eight inches across; the best truss had thirteen flowers, and the smallest, eight flowers. The individual flowers were four inches across, in a vibrant yellow orange

colour that is magnificent in sunshine, the flower having a yellow star-like throat with vibrant reddish lobes. It is a very showy and attractive Rhododendron which has won First Prize when exhibited.

The most recent sightings of *R.zoelleri* in the wild have been by Dr. Geoff Atherton of Mt. Glorious, Queensland. In the January, 1993, issue of "Vireya Venture", he wrote that he had spent five weeks in Irian Jaya in 1992 working for an Indonesian company. He was fortunate enough to visit plant communities ranging from mangrove to coastal low land, rainforest to high mountain cloud forests to alpine meadows, from where he had the opportunity to walk up glaciers at 16,000 feet elevation on Mt. Jaya.

The Rhododendrons were in abundance! Large scrambling plants of *R.zoelleri* growing in coastal rainforest trees as epiphytes. Their brilliant trusses were very large. *R.zoelleri* was also seen growing on roadside cuttings as the primary regrowth. In the area below the glacier, Dr. Atherton was surprised to see Rhododendrons growing in limestone dust with no obvious organic matter, at an elevation of 15,000 feet.