

A New Standard for Dwarf Vireya Hybrids

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From 'The Rhododendron'

Journal of the Australian Rhododendron Society

Volume 36, 1996

Very compact, floriferous dwarf vireya hybrids have been produced by the crossing of the two metre tall hybrid *R.laetum* x *R.aurigeranum* with the pygmy *R.rubineiflorum* and the crossing of R.'Sunny' with *R.rubineiflorum*. The offspring of these crosses have set a new standard for dwarf hybrids.

When mature these dwarf hybrids have hundreds of stolons arising from the base. They are very floriferous and cover themselves in bloom for up to three months. The compactness of R.'Sunny' x *R.rubineiflorum* named 'Little One' with many stolons arising from the base is illustrated in the photograph below. This plant at six years of age is just 28cm high and 53cm across (11" x 21").

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The new dwarf *R.rubineiflorum* hybrid 'Little One', showing dense foliage.

R.rubineiflorum is a new dwarf vireya species initially described by Dr. L.A. Craven in the 1980 *Notes of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh: No.38 (1)* pages 141-144. *R.rubineiflorum* has ruby red flowers measuring one and a half centimetres (5/8") across the lobes. It is quite widespread in Papua New

Guinea and has been collected in alpine shrubberies and upper montane forests.

R.rubineiflorum is considered by many enthusiasts to be the smallest rhododendron in the world. This view was supported by the late Norman Cruttwell at the Fourth International Rhododendron Conference at Wollongong in October 1988. At this conference he stated that "on Mt. Giluwe and other mountains I have collected the smallest of all rhododendrons, the prostrate *R.rubineiflorum* with its surprisingly large ruby flowers." Whilst *R.rubineiflorum* is a real pygmy, probably the title of the smallest rhododendron in the world should go to *R.caespitosum*, which was collected in West Irian as recently as 1992/93. This species has delicate pink flowers one centimetre (3/8") long on a dwarf shrublet forming a compact 'pin-cushion' less than ten centimetres (4") high.

The specimen of *R.rubineiflorum* given to the Australian Rhododendron Society in September 1981, was collected as a large plant growing in a piece of tree-fern by the late Norman Cruttwell above 2500m on Mt. Michael, Papua New Guinea. It was first exhibited to Society members at the Azalea Show at the Rhododendron Gardens, Olinda in October 1987. To obtain photographs of *R.rubineiflorum*, a member took several shots and then removed a flower for a close-up photograph. After taking the shot he then discarded the flower, which I hastily recovered and found that the small red flower was loaded with pollen.

Despite opinion by some experts that such a wide cross could not be made, the stigmas of the hybrids *laetum x aurigeranum* and 'Sunny' were crossed with the pollen of *R.rubineiflorum* on October 5th, 1987. Immediate indications were that pollination had taken place and the resultant seed was sown on ground pine bark on April 10th, 1988. Fifty-seven seedlings of the (*R.laetum x R.aurigeranum*) x *R.rubineiflorum* cross were grown on, resulting in 47 compact dwarfs, one intermediate of both parents and nine tall large leafed plants.

Plants of the *R.rubineiflorum* hybrids without any flowers, particularly 'Little One', have won the top awards at successive Annual Shows in competition with vireya plants in flower. I find this somewhat astonishing but it says much for the compactness and glossy foliage of the dwarf hybrids.

'Happy Times', (*R.laetum* x *R.aurigeranum*) x *R.rubineiflorum*, was first exhibited as a plant in flower at the Azalea Show at the Rhododendron Gardens, Olinda in October 1993. The late Alan Raper, a most successful nurseryman of some 45 years experience, was the judge. While judging, he asked a steward to go outside the Show Hall to the Vireya Valley Nursery display to obtain for him a plant, regardless of the cost.

Plants of 'Little One' and 'Happy Times' were the centre of attraction in the Hall of Horticulture at the Royal Melbourne Show during September 1994. People were fascinated how these dwarf hybrids were covered in flower and that they were growing in pure fern logs.

As reported in the Victorian Branch Newsletter of July 1996 "Guest Speaker Neil Jackson, Manager, Idaho Garden Centre, Malvern, at the July Monthly Meeting was so impressed with a potted plant of 'Happy Times' with its shiny foliage covered with dainty salmon flowers as a potential winner in the nursery trade that he wanted to propagate from it immediately."

By 1993, all the first generation progeny of both crosses had flowered but only in the pink and red shades, the pure yellows of *R.laetum*, *R.aurigeranum* and the sunset colours of *R.christianae* and *R.macgregoriae* being recessive. The classic method of securing these pure yellows whilst retaining the compact dwarfness is to mate two of the best first generation seedlings. This has been done with both crosses. In addition, the best (*R.laetum* x *R.aurigeranum*) x *R.rubineiflorum* seedling has been mated with the best 'Sunny' x *R.rubineiflorum* seedling to obtain second generation seedlings retaining the same percentage of *R.rubineiflorum*. Whilst only 65 seedlings of the three

second generation crosses have been grown on, remarkable as it may seem, all retain the compact dwarfness of the original dwarf hybrids. All these second generation progeny have multiple shoots from the base; some with as many as eight or ten shoots from the base.

Experience with the pollen of the pygmy *R.rubineiflorum* has shown that the dwarf species will cross with the larger leaved vireyas to produce exceptionally compact, floriferous dwarf hybrids. Unlike the small dwarf vireya species, these *R.rubineiflorum* hybrids are easy to grow and flower. They will grow and flower equally well in pots, in fern logs or in the ground. Because of their compact size they are readily placed even in the most crowded garden.

Without doubt, the crossing of one of the smallest rhododendrons in the world with the larger leaved vireyas has set a completely new standard for dwarf rhododendrons.