

Propagation and Cultivation Techniques for Vireya Rhododendrons[®]

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INTRODUCTION

It was around 25 or 30 years ago that I first encountered vireya rhododendrons (*Rhododendron* section *Vireya*). On a summer trip to the U.S.A. I visited the Strybing Arboretum, in San Francisco, and was surprised to find a bed of rhododendrons in full flower during August. I later found out, from the Director of the Arboretum, that these were hybrid vireya rhododendrons. He kindly supplied me with some cuttings, which duly rooted. This was the start of my vireya collection.

My collection is mainly concerned with hybrids. These generally have a better habit of growth and more exciting colours than the naturally occurring species, and make a useful addition to the range of plants available for the conservatory or cool greenhouse.

All vireyas are tender and must be kept frost-free. All my plants spend the winter months under glass or polythene where a minimum temperature of 10 to 12°C is maintained. When the danger of frost is past, generally at the end of May, vireyas are very happy outside, ideally in light shade.

If you follow a few simple rules, you will find these exciting rhododendrons quite easy to grow.

PROPAGATION

Cuttings. Vireyas root quite easily with semi-ripe healthy cuttings taken in late summer. I use a rooting medium of moss peat and perlite (1 : 1, v/v) or sharp grit. I make up a mix of 6 to 1 Synergol rooting hormone (4-indol-3-butryc acid plus 2-1-naphthyl acetic acid with dichlorophen). The prepared and stuck cuttings are rooted in cell trays, which are placed on a heated bed, maintained at a temperature of 20°C. I prefer to keep the cuttings under light polythene. Cuttings should root in around 10 to 12 weeks and can be potted on in the spring.

Seed. Seed is an alternative way of raising new plants. Vireyas have unique seeds, with a tail at each end, enabling them to float on the wind. Seed must be fresh and requires a high temperature of 22 to 25°C to ensure good germination. Seed pressed on to the surface of sifted peat should germinate in about 3 weeks.

PESTS AND DISEASES

Vireyas are generally trouble free, but do on occasion suffer from some of the pests and diseases found in the rest of the Ericaceae. Luckily, to date, I have seen no signs of powdery mildew. *Phytophthora* claims a few plants every year. Plants that are too wet with poor drainage are more prone. During the winter months, rust can be a problem. We control this by giving the plants plenty of space and encouraging air movement. When rust gets a hold, the proprietary fungicide Systhane is used. Among insect pests, vine weevil can be troublesome. Our current compost contains

suSCon green, but we plan in future to use Intercept to control this pest. Woolly aphid is perhaps the most troublesome insect, especially in the larger-leaved vireyas. Malathion sprayed in to the bud is the most effective treatment. In future we will do some trials with an Intercept drench.

USE OF VIREYAS IN GARDEN AND CONSERVATORY

All my plants are in various containers. This allows me to move them around quite easily. From October to April or May they are very happy in a conservatory, with the minimum of heat necessary to exclude frost shade. Hanging baskets make excellent containers for some of the more spreading hybrids. Pots can be moved in to the house and will flower for a long time. They also make interesting cut flowers.

I have trialled around 100 different hybrids. The majority have grown successfully. Inevitably there have been failures that do not enjoy our climate. Flowering times are unpredictable and a number flower twice in a season. Even so, I can guarantee to have a plant in flower every month of the year, even on Christmas day.

Compost. In common with all rhododendrons, they require acid compost. Currently I am using compost made up of the following: coarse grade peat and medium grade peat (1 : 1, v/v), 0.5 kg·m⁻³ starter feed, 0.5 kg m⁻³ Multicote 12, 0.75 kg·m⁻³ suSCon green, and 20 g·m⁻³ chelated iron. The finished compost has a pH of 4.8 to 5.0.

Drainage is absolutely essential for vireyas so a coarse, open compost is very important.

Containers. Again, drainage is a key requirement. Standard black plastic pots are fine if they have plenty of drainage holes. Slatted wooden containers, wire hanging baskets or ceramic pots are all suitable. Vireyas will grow happily in quite a small pot.

Watering. During the growing season, vireyas prefer to be moist but not too wet. I find the plants like to be given a good soak and then be allowed to dry out before another good soaking. In winter I keep the plants quite dry, watering every 7 to 10 days, or as required.

Feeding. With my current compost any additional feeding is unnecessary. They do respond to a liquid feed such as Vitax 111.

Pruning. If left unpruned, vireyas will make untidy plants. From the time when cuttings are taken and the terminal bud removed, to well established specimens, pruning is essential. My preference is to prune late spring to early summer.

Deadheading. Certainly worthwhile and encourages new growth.