

Plant of the Week

Vireya Rhododendrons

The *Vireya* subgroup of the genus *Rhododendron* is remarkable for occurring in tropical and subtropical regions. Its distribution is from Burma to Northern Australia with the most species located in West Papua and Papua New Guinea (see map).



As garden plants they have had two distinct careers – firstly, as specimen hot house plants in Victorian and Edwardian England and secondly, in recent times, as general garden/patio plants in Australia, New Zealand and California. Their attraction lies in the beautiful, clear flower colours, ease of cultivation and hybridization. In the wild many species form natural hybrids which suggests their origin as a distinct sub group of the Genus *Rhododendron* is comparatively recent. Many efforts have been made to hybridise *Vireya* species with the other *Rhododendron* subgroups but without success.

Before 1996 there was only one *Rhododendron* native to Australia, *R. lochiaie*, which is confined to mountain tops in N. Queensland. Then Dr Lyn Craven's attention was drawn to 2 forms of *R. lochiaie* from a Sydney nursery. He showed that the more robust form was different from the type specimen and warranted species status. After some taxonomic in fighting, the original type specimen remained *R. lochiaie* and the better known garden form became *R. viriosum*¹. It is very probable that prior to 1996 some hybrids were raised from *R. lochiaie*, but most would be from *R. viriosum*. It is also possible that undetected hybrids between the two exist since the two species have been in close proximity in more than one plant nursery!

The featured plant I have designated '**Birat Red (2)**' was raised at Macquarie from seed of '**Birat Red**' growing in New Guinea. This seed was collected by Canon Cruttewell, who did much pioneering work on **Vireya Rhododendrons**. Canon Cruttewell handed out seed from '**Birat Red**' at the International Rhododendron Conference at Wollongong in 1988. Thinking it to be an undescribed species I only flowered one plant which is the parent of about 6 specimens planted at Macquarie. It is possible that the original plant in New Guinea is a hybrid probably of *R. zoelleri* and another undetermined species. If so, our plant is really an F2 selfed hybrid.

Many **Vireya** hybrids are also planted at Macquarie in the bed fronting the F7B verandah where there is nearly always a bloom or two.

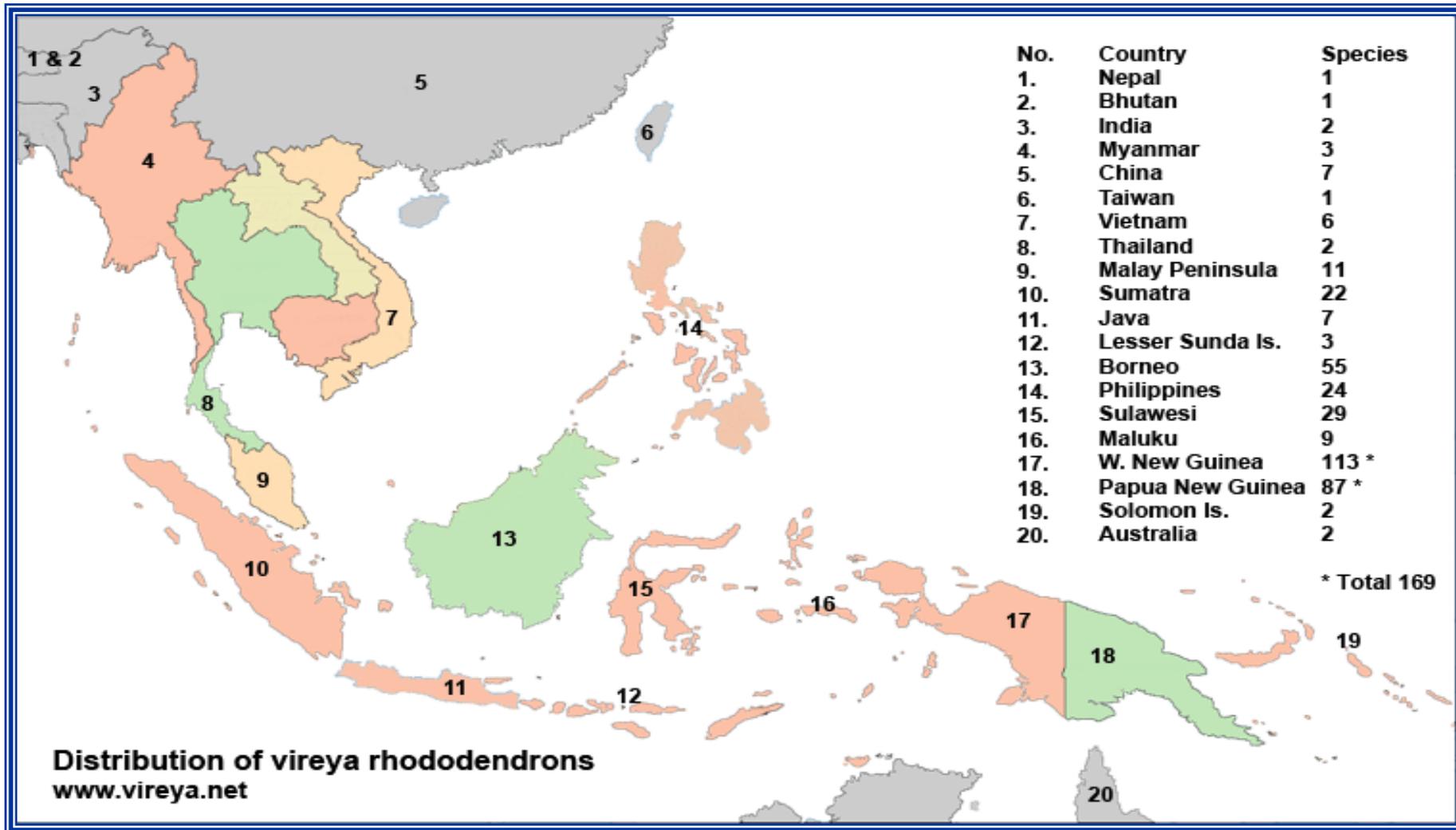
1) Craven, L.M. (2003) The Rhododendron Vol 43 (This and several other key papers can be accessed via the archive at www.vireya.net)

**Text: Roger Hiller; photographs: Irina Pollard,
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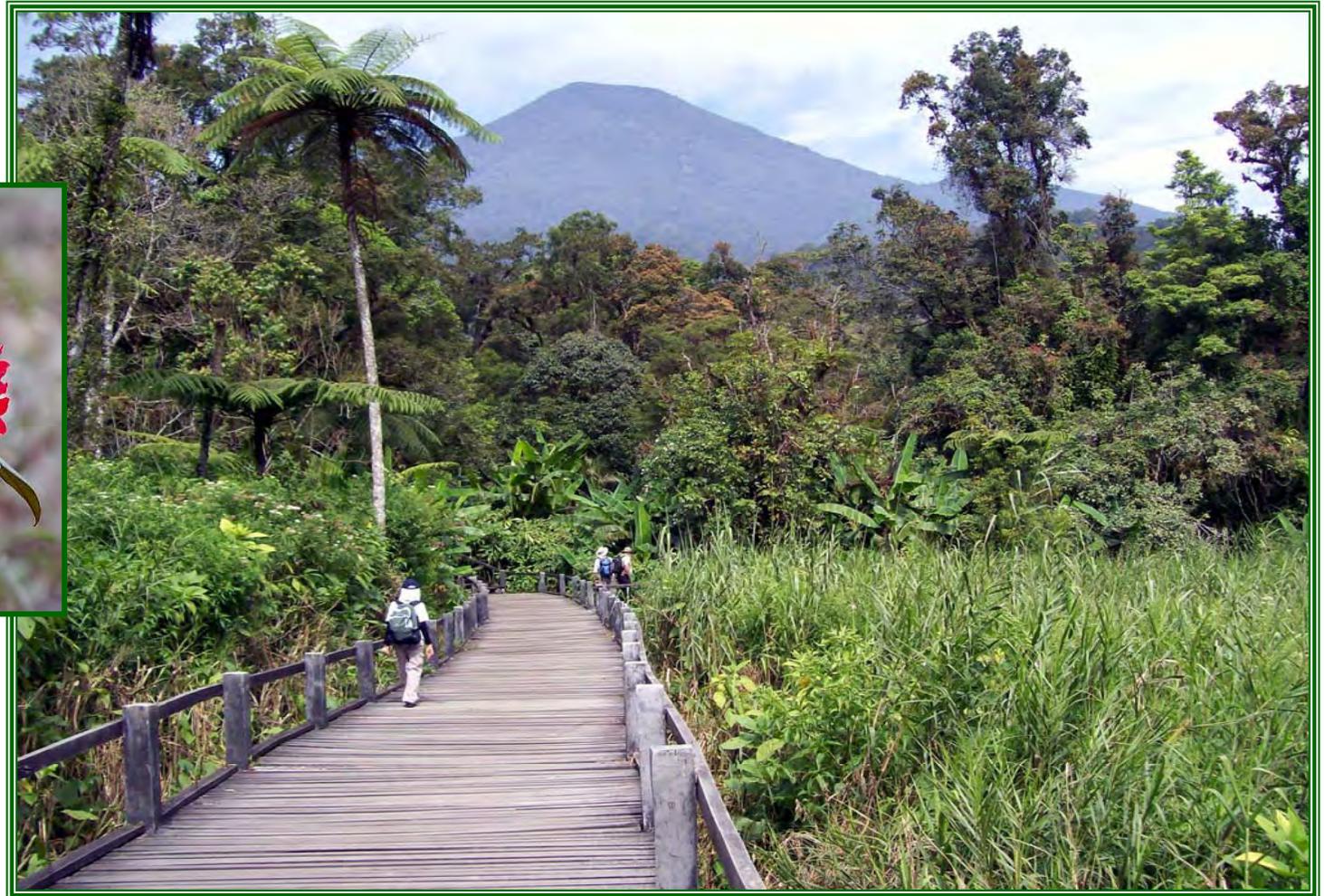
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In their natural environment, **Vireya Rhododendrons** are epiphytes, living in tree tops of tropical rainforest, such as this forest surrounding Mount Pangrango in Western Java.



Mt. Pangrango: A Downing
Epiphytic Vireya:
<http://www.alpinegardensociety.net/diaries/Northumberland/>