June 2016

PO Box 296 Olinda Vic 3788
http://www.rhododendron.com.au

Newsletter of the ARSV

Renewal of Subscriptions for 2016/17

Renewals are now due for 2016/2017. If you receive the newsletter only by email a renewal form will be emailed to you. For those who receive the posted copy the renewal form is included with this newsletter.

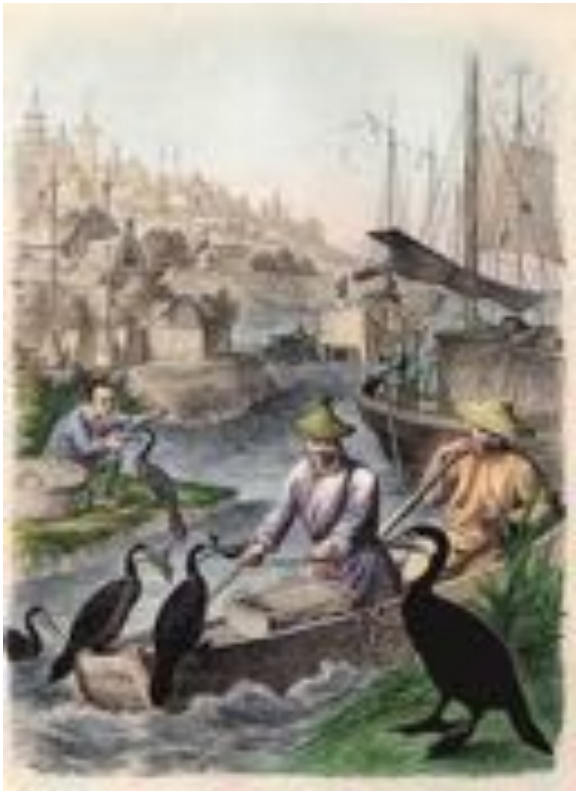
For life members and those already paid through 2017 could you please return the form with the name and address filled in so we can make sure we have your latest contact details.

PLEASE RENEW NOW.

Upcoming events

Friday 22nd July at 10 am Public presentation by Prue Crome and Dan Macleod (ARSV) "Northwest Yunnan, hunting for Rhododendrons". Domain House, Dallas Brooks Drive. This is a Friends of the Melboune Botanic Gardens event and they will be charging a $20 entry fee for ARSV members. Book on their website - browse to https://frbgm.imiscloud.com/ and enter "Winter talking Plants Morning" in their keyword search box.

Saturday and Sunday August 20th and 21st Camellias Victoria annual show. Mt Waverley Community Centre, Miller Cres., Mt Waverley .



Cultivation tips for July

While vireyas may be flowering for some of us not much is happening with the asiatics and hybrids in our gardens. Plants are lying dormant with big buds slowly developing to burst in spring. Now is certainly not the time to fertilise anything but it is an excellent time to give your plants a good clean up. Pests and their eggs lie quietly in the bits of dead leaves and broken twigs that plants have developed over the growing season. So get your secateurs and get rid of all those old bits of dead stuff hanging off the plants and cut off all the dead twigs and sticks.

For your more sensitive species check that you have a light mulch layer to keep the roots frost-free. However, do not overdo it and don't let the mulch pile up near the trunk.

Dan MacCleod

New book on Robert Fortune

One of our members, Alistair Watt has just written a book on the famous plant hunter Robert Fortune, who brought many rhododendrons into cultivation. Alistair has been a plant-hunter for over 20 years and has travelled widely. The ARSV visited his amazing garden at Laver's Hill in October 2015. This book is available for pre-ordering at http://www.fishpond.com.au/Books/Robert-Fortune-Alistair-Watt/9781842466193. The following is from that site:

"This book is the first full biography of the great Scottish plant collector Robert Fortune, famous for working in China and Japan from 1843 until 1861. This detailed presentation of his life includes an extensive analysis of his travels, plant collections and introductions, including the first maps ever produced of his collecting itineraries in China. Watt reveals that in order for Fortune to travel into the interior of China in search of new garden plants for the (later, Royal) Horticultural Society of London he had to adopt Chinese disguise, as it had been forbidden for Europeans to leave the confines of a few coastal Treaty ports. After the successful first expedition, Fortune made four more journeys to the Far East, including China, Taiwan and Japan in search of horticultural novelties. He succeeded admirably and very many of his discoveries are garden plants today. Two of his major expeditions were made in the employ of the British East India Company to aid the introduction of the tea industry into India and another expedition was carried out to investigate a possible tea industry in the USA. It has been a commonly accepted theme that Fortune was in some way 'a tea thief' and a 'spy'; the research in this book shows a completely different story. Using much new material Watt sets out to give a full account of the man, his explorations in 19th century China and the plants that he introduced into our gardens."

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Rhododendron in focus: *Rhododendron yunnanense*

Subsection Triflora

This species has a very wide distribution on the eastern side of the Himalayas including Yunnan, Sichuan, Burma, Tibet, and Guizhou, at elevations of 900 to 4300 metres.

It grows well at Olinda and we have at least a dozen plants in the Garden.This species always puts on a good show of smallish pink to white flowers with attractive reddish – brown spots on the upper lobe. One plant in the main rockery covers itself with flowers every year (photo right).

I have grown this plant at East Ringwood in the past but it tends to die out in our hot summers. Peter Cox writes in "The Encyclopaedia of Rhododendron Species" that forms from high altitudes have the best cold-hardiness while for hot dry climates, low-altitude forms should be grown. Unfortunately we don't know the origin of our species but I suspect they were imported from that chilly English climate. It would be a good idea to import seed of the lower-altitude forms for our conditions, particularly with the threat of Global Warming.

Alan Kepert

R. yunnanse at the NRG Olinda. Photo A. Kepert.


R. yunnanse in habitat in Yunnan. Photo F. Crome.

NQ surveys update

The project with James Cook University is up and running and Darren Crayn and his team from JCU have already collected Rhododendron from a couple of locations. These have been received by the Society and are in the propagating facilities at NRG Olinda. Darren and his team found a previously unknown population of *R. viriosum* on a rocky outcrop about two km from the known population on Mt Lewis.

Plans for the Society trip to North Queensland are progressing well. About 10 Members from Victoria, SA and NSW will participate (6-14 August) during which time we plan to visit Bell Peak (*R. lochiae*), Mt Lewis, Mt Spurgeon and Mt Windsor Tableland (all *R. viriosum*).

Flowering of Rhododendron x hunsteinii

Andrew Rouse's specimen of the rare Rhododendron "Hunstein's secret" is about to flower for him; the last time it did so was in 2009 (picture at left).

The original was discovered by Lyn Craven on Mt Hunstein in northern PNG. He found a single plant and got a cutting that John Rouse managed to propagate. Originally it was thought to be *R. leucogigas* but genetic analysis has revealed it to be a hybird between this and an unknown species, so George Argent in the second edition of the Vireya book refers to it now as *Rhododendron x hunstienii*. It may turn out to be a species in its own right.

Companion animal – Chinese white-browed Rosefinch

The rosefinches are a complex group of small finches in which the males are variously and beautifully patterned in shades of red, pink and crimson. Although widely distributed from Europe to Asia the genus is concentrated in southwest and western China and central Asia. This particular species, Chinese White-browed Rose Finch (*Carpodacus dubius*), occurs in Qinghai, Gansu, Ningxia, Xizang, NW Yunnan and W Sichuan at 2400 to 4600 m altitude. It occurs above and below the tree line - in undergrowth along forest edges, alpine scree slopes and meadows with *Rhododendron thymifolium, R. alpinum* and other "blue" species, birch/juniper scrub, and conifer forest with Rhododendron understorey. They forage on the ground and in low bushes on seeds, fruits and buds.

This and other rosefinches occur throughout the distribution of Rhododendron in China and the Himalayas.

Hybridize? Register? Why?

There have always been enthusiastic hybridisers right from the time of the first exciting collections from Asia in the 1800s. These growers just had to see what could be achieved by crossing these beautiful new introductions. It was probably a 'hit or miss' effort at the beginning but then more thought was given and specific crosses were made to fulfil the desired traits that the grower was after. As new cultivars were developed, they too, were then crossed and so began the basis for the cultivars we see today.

Luckily there has always been a keen core of enthusiasts all around the world who wish to continue this process of growing new and beautiful rhododendrons for our gardens. Many of these growers had a commercial background thus enabling the fruits of their labour to be widely distributed.

In Australia we became reliant on importing Rhododendron hybrids, but as many of these cultivars flowered late in the season they either succumbed to our hot, late spring weather or had a shortened flowering life. A prominent nurseryman at the time, Victor Boulter, decided he should develop earlier flowering cultivars to get over this problem. He spent many years breeding quite a number of beautiful plants, which can still be seen today in our gardens. Luckily, his son Frank carried on his father's vision when Victor died. Another major hybridizer and nurseryman was Karel van der Ven. He will always be remembered for his beautiful blooms which were exhibited at the annual show. There are still quite a number of these beauties remaining in commerce. These three men were probably the most prolific with their hybridizing. Of course there were also some exceptional cultivars developed by a small band of amateur growers, two coming to mind being Jack O'Shannassy and Don Dosser. Unfortunately there have not been many of these cultivars picked up by the commercial growers. So, many of these wonderful plants remain in just a few hands.

When more and more vireya species were brought into Australia a new band of growers could not resist the challenge of tapping into this new source and many new cultivars came onto the scene. Drs John Rouse and Bob Withers together with Brian Clancy and Graham Snell produced rhododendrons of different, brilliant colours often highly fragrant which captured the imagination of so many of the society members. We are fortunate that Dr Rouse's son Andrew has a passion for vireyas and is continuing developing new and beautiful cultivars.

Unfortunately the number of people trying their hand at hybridizing has drastically reduced and I'm not sure why. There has been so much written about the process of putting the pollen onto the stigma, developing seed pods then sowing seeds etc. that I am not going into this side of hybridizing. All I can say is it can be fun and quite rewarding. Waiting for a small seedling to finally come into flower can take many years and not every flower produced will be a winner but as the old saying goes "you won't know unless you try".

The time has come, you have developed that perfect plant covered with perfect blooms and you hear it said 'Oh you must register this'. Registering is just a methodical entering of relevant data of the cultivar. There is a universal form prepared by the international registrar in England. A copy can be obtained from your current Australian registrar (me). The philosophy behind registering is to give each new rhododendron its own unique name with corresponding details thus enabling anyone to key out and correctly identify a certain plant.

On a personal note I think we must consider seriously producing new Australian cultivars as we can no longer rely on imports from overseas. We are extremely lucky to have a great gene source from which to choose our seed and pollen parents so why not continue the wonderful work started by our earlier hybridizers and develop some spectacular new garden worthy rhododendrons for the 21st century.

Lesley Eaton

PS Graham Price is starting a new project hybridising vireyas that haven't been tried before. We need members to help get this long term venture going. No knowledge or experience is required - just enthusiasm. You will develop the skills and experience on the job. Please Contact Graham on lithi01@bigp[ond.net.au or phone 03 9639 4493. More in the August newsletter.

Rhododendron maximum and the Woolly Adelgid


Dead hemlocks in North Carolina

This story starts with hemlocks. Not the kind that killed Socrates, which is a herb *Conium maculatum*, but trees - conifers of the genus *Tsuga*. This is a genus of about 8 species common in the forests of north America and East Asia. Two species, *T. canadensis* and *T. carolinianum,* occur and often are dominant in the mixed hardwood conifer forests of the Appalachian mountains. "Are" is the wrong term here – they were dominant up until a few years ago but not now. They have been decimated by the hemlock woolly adelgid (*Adelges tsugae*), a tiny insect from Japan which has swept through southern Appalachian forests, leaving landscapes that look like a bush fire has gone through. These tiny sap-suckers infest giant trees and kill them dead – no questions asked. It is a major disaster to forests that already have had their fair share of exotic pests and diseases.

The loss of hemlocks is resulting in major ecosystem changes courtesy of *Rhododendron maximum*. This Rhododendron occurs as an understorey shrub in these forests particularly along stream banks. In these shady situations the Rhododendron grows leggy and flowers sparsely but when the canopy is open and more light gets in, such as along road verges, it thickens up and flowers profusely. The death of the hemlocks means that these high light situations occur throughout the forest and the once shaded stream sides have become like road sides. *R. maximum* is now growing much faster in these situations and, in some places, is shading out woodland plants such as Trilliums, ferns and others. This is particularly affecting tree seedlings and the rhododendron is effectively blocking forest succession.


Hemlock wooly adelgid photo from https://ag.umass.edu/sites/ag.umass.edu/files/fact-sheets/images/hemlock_woody_adelgid5.jpg

To make matters worse, *R. maximum* stores nutrients in its leaves for years, and, because fallen Rhododendron leaves decompose very slowly, nutrients remain locked up and inaccessible to other plants.

The website of the "Appalachian Mountains Joint Venture" (http://amjv.org/index.php/news/637) reports on experiments being undertaken to attempt to remedy the situation. They tested three kinds of treatment: removing only the rhododendron canopy; removing only the litter and humus layer on the forest floor by controlled burns; removing both the canopy and forest floor; and an untreated control. The treatments have already led to "increased light on the forest floor, higher soil temperatures, and more available water in the soil" and there is an expectation that "removing rhododendron will accelerate the nutrient cycle and make nutrients more available to other plants."

There is more than one way to view *R. maximum* in this context. As a native pest preventing forest regeneration that needs to be "managed", or as an ecosystem insurance policy. *R. maximum*'s rapid growth and tenacious retention of nutrients reduces the soil erosion and export of nutrients that happens when the forest canopy is opened and heavy rain gets through to bare soil. The rhododendron maybe ensures that nutrients stay on site. In the fullness of time growth of tree crowns at the edge of Rhododendron patches will likely gradually shade out the *R. maximum* and allow tree regeneration. Ecosystems work on time scales far longer than research timetables. Who knows what will happen eventually?


R. maximum in flower in North Carolina


Leggy *R. maximum* under recently dead hemlocks in the Blue Ridge Mountains (photo F. Crome)