

BOOK REVIEW

Rhododendrons of subgenus Vireya. George Argent (with contributions by David Mitchell, Louise Galloway and Stephan Helfer). London: Royal Horticultural Society and the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. 2006. xii + 382pp. ISBN 1 902896 61 0. £55 (hardback).

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Although Sleumer's (1949, 1960, 1966) vireya treatment was one of the best contributions of its time, even the most competent revisions eventually become outdated. *Rhododendrons of subgenus Vireya* answers the long-perceived need for a more modern account. With 382 pages on 24.5 × 18.5 cm, heavy matte stock, the new volume is comparable in size to issues of *Flora Malesiana* but covers a range of topics substantially wider than the *Flora*.

In recognition of the horticultural significance of vireya rhododendrons, chapters have been provided on conservation, cultivation, and disease control. There is even a kind of social register, in the form of an illustrated summary of prominent 'rhodophiles'. The text is written in a comprehensible style without the use of excessively technical terminology, as befits the eclectic nature of its intended audience. To the author's credit, this has been done in a carefully considered manner which preserves the scientific focus of his exposition. In any event, an effective and well-illustrated glossary has been included to assist novices through the technical discussions.

The main purpose of a revision is to provide the means for identifying plants *in situ* and in the herbarium. This is no easy task given the size of the group involved, especially as 37 vireyas have been added to Sleumer's (1966) conspectus. The 164 species recognized in New Guinea make *Rhododendron* the fifth largest Papuan genus. Approximately half of the Malesian *Rhododendron* species treated by Sleumer (1966) were from Papuaia, so the disparity in the numbers of new taxa between Western and Eastern Malesia (28 vs. 9 respectively) is unexpected. This contrast can be partly attributed to the lower level of exploration in the east, but it also suggests that the latter subregion has many species still awaiting discovery.

The taxonomy erected by Sleumer (1949, 1960, 1966, 1973) has survived the passage of time better than most contributions of his era. Argent notes that molecular sequencing has not provided a clear basis for altering the existing classification and retains much of its structure, though many of Sleumer's subsections are elevated to sectional status and his series within *Euvireya* have become subsections. At supraspecific level the greatest changes involve the transfer of taxa from *Pseudovireya* into a resurrected *Discovireya*, the submersion of *Solenovireya* into *Euvireya*, and the acceptance of Copeland's subsection *Malesia*. The basic organization of the original system remains otherwise intact and has been refined mostly through the addition of new species. Botanists accustomed to the earlier taxonomy should have no difficulty using Argent's arrangement.

Sleumer's infrageneric key was primarily based on leaf scales which are unfortunately susceptible to problematic intergradations. It was not unusual for individuals unfamiliar with his treatment to find themselves in the wrong species group when attempting identifications. Argent improves the critical sectional couplets by rearranging the forks and by introducing new criteria into the separations. An illustrated summary of diagnostic characters (chapter 3) will help to reduce some of the earlier difficulties.

In order to test the new system, five species from different sections (*R. beyerinckianum*, *R. gaultheriifolium*, *R. herzogii*, *R. macgregoriae*, *R. yelliottii*) were run through both keys. Judging from these trial comparisons, the current summary will be easier to apply than its predecessor. The couplets in Argent understandably employ many of the same discriminations used by Sleumer, but are presented in a more effective sequence and incorporate characteristics from a wider range of gatherings. The reassignments of *R. warianum* to synonymy under *R. leptanthum*, and of *R. luteosquamatum* under *R. inconspicuum*, avoid troublesome ambiguities in the earlier key. Sleumer's revision was a model of practical interpretation for its time. With Argent's modifications, our understanding of this group is raised to a new level of functionality.

It is particularly pleasing to have the keys in geographic subsets. This will eliminate one of the principal sources of frustration with the earlier treatment. Spot characters, distributional maps, and a list of exsiccatae (a desideratum when working in developing countries where specimens are often filed under incorrect names) would have been useful embellishments, but their omission does not detract from the volume's overall quality.

The species are arranged within the redefined sections according to the order in which the binomials fall out from the key. Each component in the descriptions (e.g. leaves, scales, flowers, etc.) is highlighted in heavy boldface to facilitate character tracking. The 10 point font and 1.5 line spacing will allow readers to scan large portions of text without the eyestrain often associated with academic publications. A thoughtful inclusion is the use of sectional and subsectional names as running titles, a welcome provision when trying to locate individual species in conjunction with the key. Conservationists and phytogeographers will also appreciate the updated entries on plant distributions. Vireyas have special significance as diversity indicators in montane environments and the modernized data on distributions correct an obvious deficiency in Sleumer's older compilations. It is disappointing to see that numerous taxa are still known only from their types, but at least these single-locality records have now been brought to the attention of collectors.

Rhododendron is one of the most photogenic of all plant genera, presenting opportunities which have not been ignored by Argent. The book's superb imagery (181 colour photos and 18 illustrations in the taxonomic section alone) clearly attests to the considerable effort expended by the author in the graphics preparation. A larger page size might have been adopted to showcase the expertly taken photos, which by themselves are a fair return for the price of admission. The average print dimension (7.5–10.5 × 5.5–8.0 cm) does only partial justice to photographs more appropriately seen as enlargements. This publication is probably destined for future editions and we can only

hope that reprintings will occur in a form commensurate with the graphical excellence of the present edition.

Rhododendrons of subgenus Vireya is a masterful effort which convincingly establishes George Argent as a leading authority on the group. Congratulations are extended to the author for this much-needed and definitive addition to the *Flora Malesiana*.

References

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