



Cultural Requirements of Vireya Rhododendron

By Pacific Island Nursery

What are Vireyas? Vireyas are semi-tropical rhododendrons, often called Malesian Rhododendrons. Their homelands include Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Borneo, Papua New Guinea and Australia. Of the 900 or so Rhododendron species, about 1/3 (over 300) are Vireya.

In their homelands, vireyas are found growing as epiphytes in the moss-encrusted lofts of tree branches, on rocks or growing as terrestrials on the ground. They grow on the forest's edges and in open grassland, seeking light. They are often the first plants to colonize areas where the original vegetation has been destroyed.

Vireyas come in a variety of shapes and sizes ranging from dwarf mats and high altitudes to all sizes of shrubs and even trees. Some have foliage that could be mistaken for pine needles while others have huge leaf blades a foot long with flowers to match. Their flowers are often fragrant and are the most colorful of all rhododendrons. Vibrant yellows and reds are common. Flower shapes vary from small, open cups to spidery clusters of long tubes.



Water & Drainage-Vireya have very fine surface roots, as opposed to a tap root. Understanding this is important as it dictates how to plant and care for vireya. Water as needed, allowing vireya to become light in weight in between watering.

The most important factor is excellent drainage. It is not how much water is received but rather, how quickly the water drains. Vireya do not like soggy feet. Think of them as orchids or anthuriums. They must be grown in a highly aerated, acidic planting mix, such as coconut chunks with perlite, orchid bark with perlite or cinder with composted material.

Shallow Planting-Shallow planting is also important. Whether in a pot or in the ground, plant your vireya with the top of the root ball at or just above the soil level. Use raised beds or mounded plantings for outdoor plantings.

The fine surface roots do heat up from the sun so a little coarse mulch (wood shavings) placed away from the crown will keep the plant moist and cool.

Vireya drop their lower leaves. Watch your new growth. If it looks fine then all is well. If you are growing your vireya in pots and you find the plants wilting daily, it may be time to repot into a larger pot. A quick check of the root ball will tell you.

Light-Vireya love bright light. Because the sun, especially during peak summer, can burn the leaves, fade color and shorten the flower life span, dappled light is recommended. Plant your vireya near other plantings or where they will receive morning versus late afternoon sun light. Leaf burn will not affect future growth but it can be unsightly. Vireya are not frost tolerant.

Fertilizing-A small amount of balanced time-release fertilizer with trace elements applied every six to nine months should be sufficient. An acid-type foliar spray can be used at ¼ strength once or twice a month.

Pinching & Pruning-Literally, pinching new growth terminals helps produce more branching-the more branches, the more flowers. Vireya usually respond to pruning well, provided it is not a hard pruning where no leaves are left.

Pests & Problems-Root rot is the number one problem caused by poor drainage or planting too deep. Look for drooping leaves giving the appearance of needing water. The leaf color is dull, flat with no shine, and even after watering the leaves stay droopy. The roots will probably be brown rather than the white/cream color on healthy plants. Sometimes there is an odor. There is not much you can do except take cuttings to start new plants. Prevention is the best cure: good drainage, serated media and shallow planting.

Lacewing insects can be a problem. These are the same ones that attack azaleas, leaving silver spots covering the leaves. Insecticidal soap will take of the problem. Spray the bottom of the leaves and to repeat the treatment about 7 days later.

Red spots can form on the leaves usually after the plant has undergone stress, such as drought. Some varieties with *R. lochia* as a parent often develop red spots. This is normal and won't affect the growth and flowering of the plant. A little fertilizer may help.

Sooty mold can be washed off leaves. Mealy bugs can be controlled with sprays such as insecticidal soap.

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