

August 2023

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Newsletter of the ARSV



President's Report August 2023

John O'Hara, ARSV President

A number of our members have been actively involved with the ARSV Committee for quite a number of years and are eagerly seeking other members to take on some of their positions. If you would like to be more involved or keen to help direct what the ARSV do, just contact me or any other committee member. None of the positions are onerous, but just require your committed time and to enjoy learning.

The Tuesday morning group have been potting up as much as they can from the propagation house to make way for the next lot of propagating in November. I have been busily working in the shade house and will provide an update soon.

Once again, a reminder about the Rhododendron Conference at Emu Valley Rhododendron Gardens being held on the 13th, 14th and 15th of October 2023. This will be a great way to connect with likeminded enthusiasts and to see a great garden. The full details for this conference are again included in the newsletter as it was in previous editions. A separate invitation will be emailed with the newsletter.

Members who do not use email will be contacted to determine how they can receive the invitation as it contains hyperlinks to ticket sales, itinerary, directions and accommodation.

In this edition, we pay a tribute to long term member Alan Kepert, who recently passed away and we include an obituary and an interview we had with Alan back in 2020. We also look at what's flowering in the Vireya House.

Reminder: ARSV Annual Membership Renewals 2023-2024

Richard Florey, ARSV Newsletter Editor and Membership Manager



For paid memberships, this is a reminder that annual membership renewals are due. The ARSV domestic and overseas membership forms are included in this newsletter edition. The ARSV communicate to members via the website, social media and hard copy publications. Please let us know your preferred method of receiving information whether via post, email or both.

The ARSV Newsletter is published bi-monthly with news and activities, items of local interest and any forthcoming activities. Event dates are on the website as well as in the newsletter.

The ARSV national journal, *The Rhododendron*, is published yearly as a high-quality colour publication featuring articles on the genus from contributors throughout Australia and overseas. It is sent to members and released at a later date on the website.

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ARSV Conference Emu Valley Rhododendron Gardens 13th to 15th October 2023

Andrew Rouse, ARSV Vice President

Further to our recent cuttings collection trip to Emu Valley Rhododendron Gardens, it also provided an opportunity to discuss with the team at EVRG the plans for this year's ARSV Conference being held there in October 2023, and to scout for potential gardens for the conference delegates to visit. For our members, here is an update on the planning for the conference. This update will also be an ongoing article in the June, August and October newsletters as a reminder of this important event.

The key note speaker and the speakers for the two technical sessions are confirmed, and in addition to these sessions there will be other speakers, garden tours etc.



The key note speaker is Seamus O'Brien, the Head Gardener at the National Botanic Gardens of Ireland, based at Killmacurragh House. Seamus is well known in horticultural (and Rhododendron) circles, he's a recipient of the Royal Horticultural Society's Gold Medal and has recently become a member of the Linnaean Society. Here's a link to a short video of Seamus talking about some of the rhododendrons at Killmacurragh.

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=442366376867394>

The first technical session speakers will summarise achievements of the 'North Queensland project.'

- Stuart Worboys, Australian Tropical Herbarium – project overview, partners, activities and achievements.
- Sue Gardiner, Plant and Food Research NZ – findings of the genetic analysis that supports formal classification of two species.
- Andrew Rouse, ARSV Vice President – ARSV's involvement, our North QLD living collection and the plans for the Cloud Forest Garden at Olinda.

The second technical session speakers will discuss the Ex-Situ conservation of rhododendron species and cultivars.

- Dr Marion MacKay, Senior Lecturer in Horticulture and Environmental Management, Massey University. Marion is on the Advisory Committee of the Global Conservation Consortium for rhododendrons and played a key role in the establishment of NZ's rhododendron conservation project.
- Andrew Brooker, Collection Officer, Pukeiti Gardens NZ. Andrew is the project manager for the NZ rhododendron conservation project.
- A facilitated panel session – the aim is to discuss the key learnings from the NZ project and how a similar initiative could be established in Australia. A driver for this is the increasing difficulty in bringing in new (or replacement) species/hybrids, thus shifting our focus to a coordinated approach to better managing what we have.

Finalising the program

The conference registration process is currently being finalised by the team at EVRG and will be circulated to members in the next newsletter and also uploaded onto the Society's website.

Seamus O'Brien will be in Melbourne from the 16th to 19th of October (Monday to Thursday) following the conference, and I would like to make best use of him. As such, I welcome suggestions from our members for engagements, such as talks, tours etc.). But I also welcome any other comments or queries members have.

A Tribute to Alan Kepert

Obituary by Elizabeth Xipell, ARSV Member

Alan Kepert, who died on the 8th of July this year, was a member of the Australian Rhododendron Society Victoria since its foundation in 1960.

He was the Rhododendron Society Registrar and Secretary and was on the committee for some years. Alan was also a Life Member. He was a regular attendee at the Tuesday morning working sessions at the Dandenong Ranges Botanic Gardens, always helping and guiding the other members. He was very keen to see the deciduous azaleas and smaller rhododendrons grown in the rockery. His regular notes on a range of rhododendrons were always very helpful. For example, his article on *Maddenia* rhododendrons in the 2004 Society journal *The Rhododendron*, has exquisite photos of the flowers and plants. He hybridised some azaleas but did not name them or have them registered. His large garden in East Ringwood had an extensive rhododendron collection along with roses and azaleas, as well as a very productive vegie garden.



His generosity and kindness will always be remembered.

ARSV Member Rhododendron Journey Interview - The Rhododendron Journal 2020

Alan Kepert, an experienced Rhododendron grower and collector by Prue Crome, ARSV Treasurer

Alan, you are widely regarded as a deeply knowledgeable person about rhododendrons, particularly species. How long have you been collecting and growing rhododendrons? Do you have a garden full of rhododendrons? What facilities do you have?

I have an old garden in East Ringwood of nearly ¼ acre on top of a hill (elevation 120m). We bought the block about 60 years ago, it was large as we both liked gardening and it was close to the Dandenong Ranges which we loved, and which influenced our choice of plants for the garden. Over the years I planted many rhododendrons but lost a lot due to our exposed position with the extremes of heat and drought that Melbourne experiences. I now have about 50 rhodos, 150 azaleas and lots of camellias and roses. I no longer have a glasshouse or shade house as I now use the facilities at Olinda for propagation.

You are a Life Member of the Australian Rhododendron Society. When and why did you join? Were there ARSV members who influenced you?

I studied chemistry and worked as a Chemical Engineer in Yarraville. I joined the society in 1960 as I wanted to be part of the development of the new garden in Olinda allocated by the State Government. I remember a public event at the Box Hill Town Hall where the Rhododendron Society had a range of experts, one being Arnold Teese, who lectured at Burnley. He was the gun grafter for Boulters, where he worked whilst establishing his nursery. Apparently, a lot of Boulters hybrids used 'Marion' which was difficult to propagate from cuttings, so most of their stock was grafted. Arnold was able to do 100 grafts per day. There were usually around 12–20 real enthusiasts at any one time, Jack O'Shannassy being one, who were knowledgeable and always very helpful.

Do you specialise in any particular type of Rhododendron or are you interested in all types? If there is a group you specialise in, what do you consider as the 'stand-out' varieties (species or hybrid) in that type?

I am interested in all types of rhodos but specialise in the *Maddenia* section and deciduous azaleas. From my experience these have been the easiest to grow in my garden. I am sure these would be popular if they were more available. I have tried *R. williamsianum* and its hybrids a few times, but they die after a few years, it's just too hot at my place. I also find the Asian deciduous azaleas like *R. nudipes*, *R. reticulatum* and *R. wadanum* do well. An interesting aside, a lot of the Japanese species in Olinda were imported from Koichiro Wada, a Japan horticulturalist. They were raised by Bob Withers and planted at Olinda in 1977. Japan has the same hardiness issues as Australia eg. heat not cold as in Europe, where lots of the early hybridising was done.

Do you have any 'tips-of-the-trade' in collecting and growing rhodos? For example, a particular type of soil mixture? Do you have any other tips, such as growing conditions or tips for propagation?

I use Attunga premium potting mix for container grown plants and occasionally add slow release fertiliser. In the garden most plants do well in my loamy black soil. If you have sticky yellow clay, dig it out and fill the hole with good soil and keep the plant high up, not in a well. In the past, glass houses were common but not with heating, so propagation success wasn't as good as it is now, such as what we have at Olinda. I used to put deciduous azaleas under fluoro lights to keep them going through the winter.

Where do you get your rhodos from? Do you get them from the Society, or do you have private sources?

I generally get my plants or cuttings through the Society, as finding a suitable nursery can be difficult. I have imported species seeds from the Royal Horticultural Society in the UK and the American Rhododendron Society over the past years. I don't order open pollinated seeds, as you never know what you will get. The early planted *R. macabeanum* at Olinda were from open pollinated seeds and as a result the flower colours range from cream, through yellow to pink – true *R. macabeanum* flowers should be yellow to yellowish-white.

Do you hybridise between your rhodos? If so, do you have specific objectives in making a cross or do you make judgements and take the opportunity when you see a couple of rhodo plants flowering?

I no longer make crosses but have made many over the past 50 years. They are not named or registered, I just do them for my own enjoyment. To name a few: • CPV4 (*R. ciliicalyx* Pink x *R. veitchianum*) possibly my best to date, early flowering, perfumed, pink and white with a touch of yellow in the throat; • *R. dendricola* x *R. chrysodoron* – a pale yellow and much easier to grow than 'Chrysomanicum'; • 'Boddaertianum' x (*R. yakushmanum* x *R. arboretum*) – pink flowers and good foliage; • (*R. yakushmanum* x *R. arboretum*) x 'Pink Delight' Also, lots of deciduous azalea seedlings from my own crosses or American Rhododendron Society seeds. I cross for more flowers and hardiness eg. (*R. luteum* x 'Gibraltar') – a floriferous bright orange, is one of my better ones.



Deciduous azalea hybrid *R. luteum* x 'Gibraltar'



R. ciliicalyx

The popularity of rhododendrons with the general public has declined in the past couple of decades. Do you have an opinion of what has caused this?

It's about choosing the best plants for where you live. Rhododendrons once established are hardier than people think, particularly the Asiatics. The plants that have done well for me in East Ringwood are: • Asiatic Rhododendron hybrids – 'Sir Robert Peel', 'Mrs E.C. Stirling', 'Donvale Pearl', 'Donvale Pink Drift', 'Perri Cutten', 'Gwilt King', and 'Seta'; • Asiatic rhododendron species – *R. formosum* ssp. *inaequale*, *R. veitchianum*, *R. burmanicum*, *R. cubbittii* Ashcombe (maybe a hybrid), *R. taggianum*, *R. ciliicalyx* Pink (maybe a hybrid), *R. ovatum*, *R. hongkongense*, *R. dendricola*, and *R. occidentale*.

Other suggested species for suburban gardens are *R. arboreum*, *R. arboreum* ssp. *delavayi*, *R. vialii*, *R. simiarum*, *R. scabrifolium* var. *spiciferum*, *R. pachypodum*, *R. carneum*, *R. lyi* and *R. horlickianum*.

What's Flowering In The Vireya House at DRBG

Andrew Rouse, ARSV Vice President



R. aequabile

We have a couple specimens in the vireya house that have been in flower for the last few months.



R. dissilistellatum

A species from Sulawesi collected and described by Lyn Craven.



R. herzogii

This is a short-flowered form, possibly a natural hybrid with another species?



R. monodii

Plants under this name need to be examined as the leaves do not fit the description of *R. monodii*.



R. retusum



R. rousei



R. torajaense



R. truncicola

R. torajaense has attracted a lot of comments whilst in flower. Its growing vigorously in the vireya house and has been on flower for over a month. It has abundant white flowers.

Collected and described by Lyn Craven.