

Planting Vireya in High Rainfall Areas

Please check our document Vireya Cultivation at www.whitecloudnursery.com. Our recommendations for cultivation emphasize the standard requirement of good drainage for healthy root growth in rhododendrons and other epiphytic plants. Typically, in native climates of Vireya, they enjoy a daily or near-daily rain shower. However, despite the preference of Vireya for a steady supply of water, growing in rainforest or other high rainfall areas still presents challenges. Vireya, very much like another epiphyte, orchids, likes water to drain away from its roots leaving behind both air and moist growing media. And, like orchids, Vireya are very susceptible to phytophthora fungus infections in soggy situations.

In our climate, the subtropical, moist east side of the Big Island, Hawai'i, rainfall ranges between 140-180 inches (355-450cm) per year. What soil we have (it's mostly lava rock) is heavily decomposed organic material, resembling a peaty bog bottom. With our rainfall this material rarely dries to any depth even after a week or more of no rain. In this situation we simply can not plant vireya in the ground. We really should not even plant them on top of (in contact with) the soil due to very likely fungus infections. In fact, we'd prefer not to have to work so hard digging holes! So we build a platform and it's better for the plant..

Start to plant your vireya by simply removing the sod in the planting location to twice the diameter of the plant's container. Scape up roots and remove any large rocks. Then place a non-degrading drainage layer into the opening. With lighter soils and less rain this could be an inch (2.5cm) or so of crushed gravel. But to allow our heavy rainfall to drain away quickly we build a platform of small (2-3", 5-7.5cm) rocks and cover the rock with a fairly coarse cinder, about 3/4" minus, loosely filling the crevices.

Standard rhododendron planting advice begins here. Examine the root ball after removing the plant from its container. If roots are dense and tight against the interior of the container, break them up. Pot bound vireya roots often encircle the root ball, especially at the top and bottom. Gently tear or cut the roots at the top. Along the side vigorously rub a gloved hand or even a rough rock over the root surface to create a rough surface. Alternatively, using a knife cut four to eight slices vertically. Tease out the roots and shake the root ball. Otherwise the bottom inch of roots can be simply cut off. With pruners cut any thick, dangling clumps of roots.

Gently spread the sad looking root ball (it's really OK!) on top of the coarse rock material. Prop the root ball up with cinder/gravel, pushing it underneath the ball to fill any air pockets and around the sides.

To retain moisture during dry periods we cover the cinder with a inch or so of organic mulch. Most commercial organic mulches created from composted plant materials, such as our wood chips or the usual fir or pine bark, should work well. The mulch should be fairly coarse to allow water to drain quickly, but at the same time retaining water within the mulch material. Do not use anything with a high fertilizer content such as chicken manure without significant dilution. Continue to cover the root ball with your mulch, packing it in as necessary. At the end you should have a somewhat domed pile of mulch with the root ball surface exposed at the top.

Often this construction means that your Vireya is perched high above the ground and subject to getting pushed over by the wind. Most people can simply stake up the plant. Due our very rocky ground we weight down the flat root ball with large rocks. To facilitate this and add a local design touch, we often build a low rock circle around the plant, perhaps adding more cinder and mulch. We can also then rest larger rocks partially on the wall and partially on the roots for better stability.

Water the mulch well and in a few days apply some commercial time release fertilizer at about half strength just outside the circumference of the root ball. If the weather is warm watering every day for a few days, then at a longer interval, is a good idea. Once established Vireya are quite drought-hardy, again due to their generally epiphytic nature. When a plant's only soil is a layer of moss and debris on top of a rock, it had better be prepared for the dry days!