

Looking for Rhododendron in Sulawesi

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In his book "Flora Malesiana", Dr. Sleumer writes about Vireya Rhododendron which grow in the Toraja region near Rantepao and Rantelemo in Sulawesi (Celebes).

Spending our vacation on Bali, we take a short side trip to Sulawesi. In Ujung Pandang we meet Acho - our invaluable companion. We rent a car and set off northbound. In Rantepao we start our first attempt to find a *Rhododendron seranicum*, mainly found in the Moluccas. A slightly different species is said to grow on the road from Rantepao to Palopo. On a pass, at 1180 metres, we stop by a TV station where we find the white blossoms of *Rhododendron rhodopus*. Much to our surprise we find another rhododendron, probably *Rhododendron seranicum* with small petals in rose and purple in blossoms that are two inches long. It is the only one of its kind in this area. After having seen a few more *Rhododendron rhodopus* we return to Rantepao.

On the next day we climb Gunung Sesean starting from Batutumonga. We were here two years ago, in January. At 1300 metres a.s.l. we find a *Rhododendron rhodopus*. Next to it, by a little lake, we spot a beautiful bush about two metres high and covered with small red blossoms - *Rhododendron quadrasianum* var. *celebicum*. The vegetation on top of the mountain was destroyed by fire two years ago but has since recovered. We find a *Rhododendron zollingeri* in bloom and a *Rhododendron rhodopus* with two wonderful white blossoms growing from what seems to be dead wood. The rhododendron here are obviously resistant to fire.

On the next day we look for *Rhododendron vanvuurenijii* which, according to "Flora Malesiana", can be found between Rantepao and Rantelemo. Its blossoms are yellow and orange or white and pink, so it is easily spotted. We

walk across hills all day, from Rantepao to Rantelemo without finding anything.

The landscape here looks very cultivated and the reports about *Rhododendron vanvuureonii* are fairly old. Dr. Sleumer writes that they are mainly to be found in the west of the Latimodjong Range. Rantepao and Rantelemo are in the north, so we start another attempt further south, near Cakke.

It is a beautiful day so we stop at the village Karangan to take a picture of Gunung Sinadji, of which there is an excellent view here. Since we haven't found a lot of cuttings and are left with plenty of time, we decide to climb Mount Sinadji.

Acho has never been there before but says that he knows somebody who has and tells us not to worry. At first we have to get to Uluwai, a village at 1000 metres a.s.l. which lies at the end of the valley. After a long search, Acho finds a truck and we are seated between bags of fertilizer, rice and women working on the market. Our journey on bad and bumpy roads takes about three hours and finally takes us to Uluwai - a settlement at the end of the valley in a landscape of breathtaking beauty. We find accommodation in a little hut owned by friendly, hospitable people. They even have a canopy for their guests. We also find a guide and carriers for our luggage.

On the next morning we set out. Walking uphill through rice fields, we leave the inhabited area. At 1300 metres, in bushy vegetation, we are surprised to see the bright yellow-orange blossoms of *Rhododendron vanvuureonii* which remind us of *Rhododendron zoelleri* from New Guinea and the hybrid R.'Simbu Sunset'. Later on our way back we take a few cuttings. We continue on a steep slope through high ferns. It begins to rain and soon we find the first leeches. We have almost forgotten the hardships involved in climbing tropical mountains. The path has not been regularly used and is sometimes invisible.

Our journey continues through steep oak forests, while our guide keeps cutting a path with his cutlass and marking the trees every once in a while. At 2000 metres we find a resting place. The ascent is getting more and more difficult. In the foggy forest we lose our orientation, climb over fallen trees that have sunk in the muddy ground and continue uphill. When we are close to giving up, we finally find the main path again. It is barely visible. We climb over roots and under fallen trees, still going uphill. Taking a little rest we discover the sizeable blossoms of *Rhododendron radians* high up on a tree. At 2400 metres our guide stops. We are at a little campsite, the last one with a water supply before the summit. We put up our tents and rest for a while, then climb on towards the summit. At 2700 metres we find yet another rhododendron with pink blossoms and brown leaf bottoms, maybe *Rhododendron pudorinum* or *Rhododendron arenicolum*.

A thunderstorm is coming up and the thunder is gaining force. After eight hours of strenuous climbing we are very exhausted and have to make our way back. Hardly have we arrived at our campsite when we are beset by heavy rainfall. There will be no hot dinner tonight. Acho could not buy gas in Ujung Pandang and it is impossible to make a fire with all the wet wood. On the next morning we have tea and noodles. High up on a stem, Acho has discovered a *Rhododendron radians* in full bloom. Acho and I are both unable to climb up, but we have with us a young man who gathers some rotang, a kind of liana which is used for manufacturing rattan furniture. With great ease the young man climbs up six or seven metres and retrieves a branch with two large inflorescences. It is a *Rhododendron radians* with roughly 15 flowers, white and wide open. The trees are full of orchids but only a few of them are in bloom.

The mountain forests of Indonesia are one of the few landscapes of the world that remain untouched. Long stretches of lichen and moss hang from the trees. At 2300 metres we find a magnificent rhododendron with three tubular blossoms, probably *Rhododendron psilanthum*. Next to a thicket of Heliconia we find two more large white blossoms on the ground. They are about four

inches long, two inches wide and fragrant. This has to be *Rhododendron bloembergenii* which also grows here on the Latimodjong Range. The plant itself cannot be found. The way down is even more arduous than the way up. The young man has brought us a handful of rhododendrons from the peak area. They are the same that we have found previously, pink blossomed and with brown leaf bottoms - *Rhododendron pudorinum* or *Rhododendron arenicolum*. There is also a rhododendron without blossoms, with large, thick leaves that grow mostly at the end of the shoots. At 1300 metres we find another *Rhododendron vanvuureonii*. The orange and yellow blossoms shine out from the undergrowth. Next to it we find another very attractive kind, with yellow tubes and petals of a pink hue. Of both plants we take cuttings.

Very exhausted we arrive in Uluwai. We spend one more night there. After the heavy rainfalls during the night we have difficulties reaching the main road from Rantepao to Pare Pare, where our driver is waiting with the car. From Ujung Pandang we go back to Bali where we spend a few more days recovering from the trip. This adventure has made a great impression on all of us. After a twelve hour flight we reach our home in Tyrol via Vienna. The cuttings seem to be in good shape and we will see whether they grow roots. This was certainly an adventurous journey. The "easy gathering of Rhododendrons" definitely has its limits in Sulawesi.