Rhododendron enthusiasts are greatly pre-occupied with growing new cultivars, species and more recently Vireya rhododendrons. Generally, little is known about the introduction of rhododendrons in the nineteenth century and how much we owe to those who pioneered their introduction. This article is an attempt to put together some of the story as far as Victoria is concerned.

The earliest mention I have found, of a rhododendron in Victoria is for R. ponticum shown by John Rule of the Victoria Nursery at the Victorian Horticultural Society's Show of 1850. This rhododendron and possibly a few others may have been available earlier. Elsewhere James Dickinson of Hobart had available R. ponticum and R. ponticum album in 1845. In South Australia the Adelaide Observer of 3 May 5 lists many plants for sale, among them R. ponticum. The earliest mention of a rhododendron in New South Wales that I know of comes from Alexander Macleay's list of plants received from Camden Park. It is an early entry in the book, and Jennifer Stackhouse puts it at either 1826 or 1836. The first rhododendron must have come into this country some time prior to whichever date is correct.

The popularity of rhododendrons in Victoria was slow to develop. This was probably due as much to the lack of any substantial stock being available, as to uncertainty, perhaps, about their suitability for the climate. By 1857, however, John Rule lists R. arboreum and R. arboreum album as well as several unnamed species and varieties. Lack of a reliable water supply was probably another factor slowing down the cultivation of rhododendrons in Melbourne. Water from the Yan Yean reservoir only became available in 1858.

In the United Kingdom, however, rhododendrons were extremely popular, with the discovery and introduction of many new species from the Himalayas by Sir Joseph Hooker. A lot of hybridisation took place there. Henderson's catalogue of 1857 lists 157 species and cultivars, whilst by 1860 over 500 varieties had been raised. (E.H. Cox, The development of Rhododendrons. Country Life. May 14 1981). English gardening information would have been available locally and horticultural trends in the United Kingdom tended to be followed out here.

The Melbourne Botanic Gardens do not seem to have had much influence in popularising rhododendrons. Plant lists still extant show that R. ponticum was in the gardens in 1857. The following year 14 species are listed but no R. ponticum. In 1859 nine species are mentioned, but none of them, oddly enough, is the same as those of previous years. It may be that they didn't thrive in the summer heat when the gardens had very real problems with watering.

Guilfoyle, in his report of 1875, says: 'Rhododendrons from the American Garden were removed to the nurseries in the Botanic Garden'. This garden was either in the Domain or in the Government House garden and the rhododendrons were not flourishing. The following year Guilfoyle's report says: 'I have a fine collection of azaleas but rhododendrons are deficient.' He must have remedied this situation, though, because some of the cultivars in the gardens today are thought to be 100 years old.

In 1867 the Australasian of 16 November had an article entitled 'Our Favourite Flower - The Indian Rhododendrons', which states: 'It cannot be doubted that the rhododendron is the prince of ornamental evergreen shrubs. And it may be added that if the amateur has a turn for observation and experiment, there is scarcely any province of hybridising so full of promise and enjoyment. This article
lists twelve rhododendrons. All but four are to be found in lists of plants in the Melbourne Botanic Gardens for the year shown in brackets after each. They were R. argenteum (1859), R. aucklandii (now R. griffithianum), R. dalhousii (1858), R. edgeworthii (1858), R. boothii, R. cinibarinum (1859), R. falconeri (1859), R. thomsonii (1859), R. maddenii (1859), R. jenkinsii (now R. maddenii), R. nuttali, R. wightii (1859).

To quote again from this article: 'The time was when if a gardener proposed planting rhododendrons he was thought to be a fit subject for the Yarra Bend; but thanks to the perseverance and skill of our best practicals and amateurs, that time has passed away, and we now have the pleasure of seeing the rhododendrons growing and flowering freely in our shrubbery borders.'

The writer of the article says he had himself grown rhododendrons successfully and suggests that other keen gardeners were doing likewise. By this time, nurseries must have been bringing in more varieties and wealthy enthusiasts may have made their own importations. However, I have been unable to find any specific information about rhododendrons in private gardens in Melbourne then.

A single rhododendron truss was exhibited at the Victorian Horticultural Society's show in 1867, but it was not named. Mr Hugh Glass exhibited R. ponticum at the Spring Show in October 1868. It was not until the Spring Show of November 1871 that a prize was given for rhododendrons; this went to Mr James Scott of the Hawthorn Nursery for two exhibits.

The following year, 1872, at the Horticultural Society's Spring Show the Australasian reported that Mr James Scott of the Hawthorn Nursery 'made the first showing of rhododendrons that has ever been made in the colony'. This was with seven varieties. At the same show Thomas Lang and Co. of Ballarat showed five varieties of rhododendron. (Figure 1)

In November 1873, rhododendrons were seen at

Figure 1 Thomas Lang and James Scott, pioneer Victorian horticulturalists (Victorian Historical Magazine Vol. XVIII, 1, February 1940, facing p. 8)
the Ballarat Horticultural Society's Show for the first time, when nurseryman Thomas Lang gained two first prizes. At the same show a year later Thomas Lang had 'a gorgeous display of rhododendrons on the stage', which numbered about 40 plants. The Ballarat Star reported: 'Such a collection by one single exhibitor has perhaps never been seen in the colony'.

In 1874 the Horticultural Society of Victoria had obviously introduced a class for rhododendrons. Again Messrs Scott and Son of Hawthorn gained first prize for six distinct varieties, though the entry was criticised for 'old and badly furnished plants'. Thomas Lang of Ballarat again won second prize though some plants were 'wanting vigour of growth and symmetry'.

Clearly rhododendrons were gaining in popularity. In 'Garden Memoranda on Lilies and Lily Culture and Rhododendrons', [the Australasian, 21 November 1874], it was said of rhododendrons: 'There is no reason why such sites as the Dandenong Road and Caulfield should not become as famous as the Knap Hill Nurseries of Messrs Waterer for all kinds of peat loving plants'...a highly optimistic view as far as rhododendrons were concerned.

Whilst some Melbourne nurseries stocked a limited range of rhododendrons, Ballarat was climatically more suited to their cultivation. Outstanding in this regard was the nursery of Thomas Lang and Co. (later Lang, Rennie and Co.). The nurseries of R U Nicholls and George Smith were also notable for their rhododendrons.

Some accession lists of plants coming into Thomas Lang's nursery for the years July 1856 to October 1859 and 1860 to 1867 indicate his interest in this shrub. In 1864, of 90 rhododendrons imported, 50 were R. ponticum. The next year, of 70 imported 50 were R. ponticum. Thirty-four hybrids came in 1863, and 500 R. ponticum in 1864. In 1867 Lang imported 54 hybrids. Obviously he intended to use the R. ponticum as under stock for grafting.

An indication of Lang's enterprise can be obtained from the varieties listed in his catalogues. In 1865 there were 31 varieties of rhododendrons, in 1866 49 varieties, in 1872 98 varieties. The Australasian of 5 December 1874 has an article on Lang's rhododendrons. The firm had a small nursery in Collins Street and showed the rhododendrons in the fernery, some 21 varieties being named. Most interesting, however, is the fact that one of them, W J Craig, was a hybrid of Lang's own raising. Lang also raised another hybrid that attracted attention. This was named Bella Wilfer. He must have been the first hybridiser of rhododendrons in Victoria, if not in Australia. This same article also makes the point that compared to England: 'Rhododendron growing has not yet attained even moderately large proportions in Victoria'.

This situation, however, was about to change, particularly as wealthy Melbourne citizens established summer homes on Mount Macedon from the late seventies onwards. More nurseries were becoming interested in rhododendrons. In Melbourne in 1877 James Scott listed more than 80 rhododendrons, and in 1881 Law Somner and Co. who had taken over the nursery established at Cromorne by Thomas Lang, inherited a very large stock of rhododendrons with the nursery. John Smith's nursery at Riddell's Creek had also begun to market rhododendrons. A nursery long established in Toorak, Taylor and Sangster, now comes on the scene as a major grower of rhododendrons. This nursery had always been very prominent in the prize lists of horticultural shows in Melbourne, and a branch nursery had been established on Mount Macedon in 1876. It has been said that this was with the encouragement of both von Mueller and Guilfoyle. A catalogue of 1887 shows that Taylor and Sangster offered 120 varieties of rhododendrons.

E E Pescott in his article 'Pioneer Victorian Horticulturalists' in the Victorian Historical Magazine, February 1940, says of Taylor and Sangster's nursery: 'This firm specialised and indeed was the first so to do in rhododendrons, a class of flowering shrubs soon to become very popular'. Enough has been said to show that several nurserymen were well ahead of Taylor and Sangster in this regard. However, the firm was a leading grower of rhododendrons in the last two decades of the nineteenth
century and in the early twentieth century, and it was already exporting rhododendrons to New Zealand prior to 1900.

Mention has already been made of the lack of records regarding the plants in private gardens last century. If garden owners did keep records, either these have not come to light or they have been lost or destroyed. We do nevertheless learn something from articles in the horticultural section of The Australasian and other papers. Some of the planting at Wombat Park, Daylesford, the property of the Hon. W E Stanbridge MLC, is detailed in an article in the Leader (May 1880). Mention is made of rhododendrons but no varieties are named though they must have been planted in the early 1860s: The Australasian of 9 May 1865 mentions, in reference to Wombat Park: 'A collection of imported hybrid rhododendrons by themselves on a southern slope and thriving well although they never receive a drop of artificial watering in the driest seasons'.

The only private garden for which a fairly extensive plant list survives is that of Charles Ryan at Derriweit Heights, Mount Macedon (Figure 2). Charles Ryan went to the Mount in 1873, but unlike most of the wealthy folk who only had summer residences there, he lived there permanently and developed a garden that was renowned. He imported many of his trees and shrubs direct from England, Holland and America. He must have had an extraordinary variety of rhododendrons for (in The Australasian of 13 December 1884) he tells us that the lake, which had been transformed from a swamp, was 'a fitting foreground for hundreds of rhododendrons'.

In The Australasian of 13 November 1886 we read: 'A glorious display of these beautiful flowers (rhododendrons) has been on view at Mr Adamson's, Collins Street West, since Monday last, when a first instalment consisting of about three dozen trusses was received from the grounds of Mr Charles Ryan, Upper Macedon...On Wednesday a second instalment containing some thirty additional varieties was received. Many of these beautiful varieties were imported by Mr Ryan and are not to be found in other colonial collections.'

In 1887, at the Centennial Exhibition, Mrs Charles Ryan exhibited 31 rhododendrons for which she was awarded the First Order of Merit. So many people were interested in these plants that letters were written to the press asking for names...which were published shortly after. Only two of them might be found to-day, though one, Old Port, is certainly still growing on the Mount.
Others may well have survived though their names have been lost.

Around the turn of the century the Dandenongs became the centre for growing rhododendrons and nurseryman, William Chandler and his sons, Bert and John, were notable in this regard. Some of their early rhododendrons came from J C Cole as well as from Taylor and Sangster. However, this is taking the story into the twentieth century, which is really another chapter.

(My thanks are due to Dr Peter Lumley and Dr Roger Spencer for making available the plant lists held in the National Herbarium.)