

Harakeke / New Zealand flax

Native plants

We all recognise the tall, green, sword-like leaves of flax that can be found growing throughout New Zealand.

Harakeke was the name given to this plant by Māori. The first European traders called it 'flax' because its fibres were similar to that of true flax found in other parts of the world. Although we still call it flax today, harakeke is really a lily. Flax is unique to New Zealand and is one of our most ancient plant species.

P. Gerbeaux



Where is it found?

There are two identified species of flax in New Zealand. Common flax (*Phormium tenax*) is found throughout the country, especially in wet areas, while mountain flax (*Phormium cookianum* – also called wharariki) is found both at higher altitudes and along exposed coastlines.

Flax facts

- Flax bushes will often support a large community of animals, providing shelter and an abundant food resource. Tui, bellbirds/korimako, saddlebacks/tieke, short tailed bats/pekapeka, geckos and several types of insects enjoy nectar from the flax flower.
- Flax snails, a rare land snail living only in the Far North, often shelter under flax bushes. These snails don't eat any part of the flax, but rather they munch on fallen leaves from native broadleaved trees.
- Common flax grows up to three metres high and its flower stalks can reach up to four metres. It has seedpods that stand upright from the stems. Mountain flax never grows as large as common flax, rarely reaching more than 1.6 metres high, and its seedpods hang down.
- Within the two flax species, there are numerous different varieties of flax. Some have drooping, floppy leaves while others grow as stiff and upright as spears. Flax flowers can vary in colour from yellow to red to orange.
- Flax was a valuable resource to Europeans during the nineteenth century because of its strength. It was New Zealand's biggest export



by far until wool and frozen mutton took over later in the century.

- Today, flax is used in soaps, hand creams, shampoos and a range of other cosmetics. Flax-seed oil can also be found for sale. There have even been experiments to make flax into wine!

Flax sap
T. Cathell-Black



D. R. Towns



- Traditionally when harakeke leaves were removed from the plant, only the older leaves on the outside were taken. It was believed the three inner layers of the plant represented a family. The outer layer represented the grandparents, whereas the inner layer of new shoots – the child – remained and were to be protected by the next inner layer of leaves, the parents.

Did you know?

Flax was the most important fibre plant to Māori in New Zealand. Each pā or marae typically had a 'pā harakeke', or flax plantation. Different varieties were specially grown for their strength, softness, colour and fibre content.

The uses of the flax fibre were numerous and varied. Clothing, mats, plates, baskets, ropes, bird snares, lashings, fishing lines and nets were all made from flax leaves. Floats or rafts were made out of bundles of dried flower stalks. The abundant nectar from flax flowers was used to sweeten food and beverages.

Flax also had many medicinal uses. The sticky sap or gum that flax produces was applied to boils and wounds and used for toothache. Flax leaves were used in binding broken bones and matted leaves were used as dressings. Flax root juice was routinely applied to wounds as a disinfectant.

Threats

Flax is generally a very common plant throughout New Zealand, but many of the special forms that were cultivated by Māori for weaving were nearly lost during the twentieth century. Luckily, a few growers maintained their collections of special flaxes over the years. These cultivars have been in strong demand again due to a revival of interest in flax weaving over the last 20 years. Landcare Research now holds national collections of the unique cultivars and distributes plants to weaving groups and marae throughout the country.

How can you help?

Flax makes an excellent garden plant. It will attract native birds such as bellbirds/korimako and tui and provides wonderful shelter. Native plants are a great way to enhance your own garden as well as your city or town's environment.

Further information

For further information about flax, visit your local Department of Conservation office or see www.doc.govt.nz.

There are also flax weaving collections that you can visit at the Auckland Regional Botanic Gardens (www.arc.govt.nz/arc/auckland-regional-parks/botanic-gardens/discover-the-plants/flax-weaving.cfm) and the Wellington Botanic Gardens (www.wellington.govt.nz/services/gardens/botanicgardens/collections.html)