

# Vegetable caterpillar / āwhato

## *Cordyceps robertsii*

The vegetable caterpillar is not a caterpillar at all but a parasitic fungus. It looks like a caterpillar because the fungus has consumed the live forest ghost moth caterpillar from the inside out.

The forest ghost moth caterpillar spends most of its daylight hours in a hole in the ground that it lines with silk. It comes out at night to feed in the leaf litter on the forest floor. While feeding, the caterpillar can come into contact with the spores of the deadly fungus.

The fungus quickly spreads through the caterpillar's body dissolving its internal organs and turning it into food for itself. Eventually the fungus fills up the caterpillar's body. Once it has completely taken over the body of the caterpillar and used up all its food, the fungus sprouts a thin stalk out of the caterpillar's head. This fungal fruiting body releases spores into the leaf litter ready to attack the next unsuspecting porina caterpillar. The caterpillar-encased fungus is known as the vegetable caterpillar or āwhato.

Āwhato was used by Māori as a tattooing pigment. It was collected, dried, burnt and then crushed into a powder. The powder was mixed with fat and water to make a paste. The tattoo pattern was drawn out and then cut into the skin using a tool called the uhi puru.

### Other resources

*New Zealand Geographic* magazine #12 Oct-Dec 91  
Caterpillar Killer (Secondary kit only)

[www.landcareresearch.co.nz](http://www.landcareresearch.co.nz) > research >  
biodiversity > fungiprogram > foray > pathogens



