

Cordyline australis

COMMON NAME

cabbage tree, tī, tī kōuka, palm lily

SYNONYMS

Dracaena australis Forst.f., *Dracaenopsis australis* (Forst.f.) Planchon

FAMILY

Asparagaceae

AUTHORITY

Cordyline australis (G.Forst.) Endl.

FLORA CATEGORY

Vascular – Native

ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

STRUCTURAL CLASS

Trees & Shrubs - Monocotyledons

NVS CODE

CORAUS

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

$2n = 38$

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2017 | Not Threatened

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2012 | Not Threatened

2009 | Not Threatened

2004 | Not Threatened

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Common palm-like tree with an erect trunk branching into tufts of tough long narrow pointed leaves and with bushy sprays of small white flowers. Bark rough. Leaves 30-100cm long, only slightly tapered at base, dead leaves often forming a skirt around branches. Fruit small, white.

DISTRIBUTION

Endemic. Common in the North, South and Stewart Islands. Probably naturalised on the Chatham Islands.

HABITAT

Widespread and common from coastal to montane forest. Most commonly encountered on alluvial terraces within riparian forest.

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING

FAC: Facultative

Commonly occurs as either a hydrophyte or non-hydrophyte (non-wetlands).



Cabbage tree. Photographer: Department of Conservation, Licence: Public domain.



Cabbage tree. Photographer: Department of Conservation, Licence: Public domain.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Tree up to 20 m tall, trunk stout, 1.5-2 m diam, many-branched above (prior to flowering, trunk slender and solitary, branching happens after the first flowering). Bark corky, persistent, fissured, pale to dark grey. Leaves numerous (0.2-)0.3-1(-1.5) x (0.2)-0.3(-0.6) m, dark to light green, narrowly lanceolate to lanceolate, erect to erecto-patent, scarcely inclined to droop, midrib indistinct. Petiole indistinct, short. Inflorescence a panicle. Peduncle stout, fleshy 40 mm or more in diam., panicle of numerous flowers, (0.6-)1(-1.8) x .3-0.6(-0.8) m, branching to third or fourth order, these well spaced, basal bracts green and leaf-like, ultimate racemes 100-200 mm long, 20 mm diam., bearing well-spaced to somewhat crowded, almost sessile to sessile flowers and axes. Flowers sweetly perfumed, perianth 5-6 mm diam., white, tepals free almost to base, reflexed. Stamens about same length as tepals. Stigma short, trifid.

SIMILAR TAXA

Could be confused with the northern, primarily offshore island *C. kaspar* and its close relative, the Norfolk Island *C. oblecta* (probably both these should be merged). From these it can be distinguished by the larger heavily branched tree form, narrower leaves with a rather smaller, ill-defined, flat petiole, and smaller seeds. *C. australis* is rather variable, and some northerly offshore islands forms of it are either hybrids with, or might be better placed with *C. kaspar*.

FLOWERING

(September-) October-December (-January)

FLOWER COLOURS

White

FRUITING

(December-) January-March

LIFE CYCLE

Fleshy berries are dispersed by frugivory (Thorsen et al., 2009).

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE

One of the most widely cultivated New Zealand natives, very popular in Europe, Britain and the U.S.A. Easily grown from fresh seed (seedlings often spontaneously appear in gardens from bird-dispersed seed), emergent shoot, stem and even trunk cuttings. Very hardy and will tolerate most soils and moisture regimes but dislikes long periods of drought. Excellent in pots and tubs. Numerous cultivars exist that will suit any situation.

THREATS

Populations have been decimated from some parts of the country due to a mysterious illness linked to a Myovirus Like Organism (MLO) which is believed to cause the syndrome known as Sudden Decline. Plants stricken with this illness suddenly, and rapidly, wilt, with the leaves falling off still green. If the bark is peeled off the base of the tree near the soil line blackened or rotten spots are typically present. Once stricken with Sudden Decline there is no cure and the trees can die within days. Recently there has been some evidence to suggest the severity of Sudden Decline is lessening.

ETYMOLOGY

cordyline: From the Greek *kordyle* 'club'

australis: Southern

WHERE TO BUY

Common in cultivation, and widely sold both within New Zealand and around the world.

NOTES ON THEIR STATUS

Cabbage trees, because they are very resilient are often the last indigenous plant to persist within cleared land. However, even these specimens will over time die, and unless such remnants are fenced as the young seedlings are greedily eaten by livestock. Cabbage trees remain a common and thriving species within much of the more highly modified ecosystems of coastal and lowland New Zealand. Recently there has been some evidence to suggest the severity of Sudden Decline is lessening.

FORAGING FOR CABBAGE TREE

Click on the Radio New Zealand National logo to listen to This Way Up. Simon Morton interviews Johanna Knox about foraging for *Cordyline australis* - the cabbage tree or *Ti Kouka* (duration: 13'35").

ATTRIBUTION

Fact sheet prepared by P.J. de Lange for NZPCN (1 June 2013)

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Beever, R. et al. 1996. Sudden decline of cabbabe tree. *NZ Journal of Ecology*, 20(1): 53-68

Duguid, F. 1976. *Cordyline australis* at Lake Kopureherehe. *Wellington Botanical Society Bulletin*, 39: 46-47

Thorsen, M. J.; Dickinson, K. J. M.; Seddon, P. J. 2009. Seed dispersal systems in the New Zealand flora.

Perspectives in Plant Ecology, Evolution and Systematics 11: 285-309

NZPCN FACT SHEET CITATION

Please cite as: de Lange, P.J. (Year at time of access): *Cordyline australis* Fact Sheet (content continuously updated). New Zealand Plant Conservation Network. <https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/cordyline-australis/> (Date website was queried)

MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/cordyline-australis/>