



## WHAT ARE THE MOST FAVOURITE NEW ZEALAND NATIVE PLANTS?

### Voting 2002

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If you were asked to name your most favourite native plants, what would be your answer and what would be your reason? What would be the top ten most popular plants for New Zealand.

The first survey to find the ten most favourite plants was undertaken towards the end of 2002. Based on a similar project carried out in the U.K. by the conservation organisation Plantlife, the aim was to help raise a greater awareness of native plants. 260 entries were received from throughout New Zealand and one from Australia. The entries came from all ages including a 92 year old lady who said about Kowhai *"it's tracery of stems against a blue sky, then rows of dainty leaves on thin stems, followed by beautiful golden flowers"*.

As each entry arrived the ten chosen plants were scored from 10 to 1 (10 for the person's first choice and 1 for the tenth choice). The total scores were calculated for each species. The project (supported by the Department of Conservation) was greeted with enthusiasm ("neat project", "great initiative") and many people said they were challenged but rewarded by the survey. Many responded to the invitation to give reasons for their choice.

One comment made many times was that New Zealand native plants are so underrated as garden plants; *"Only in the last five years have I begun to really appreciate how our natives can make wonderful forms in an urban garden. I hope to transform my garden into a native garden that reflects our fantastic diversity in plants"*. Another added *"New Zealand native plants are among the best in the world for companion planting, texture and colour. They sustain our wonderful bird life and need very little maintenance"*.

Some choices evoked happy childhood memories of walks in native bush or school exercises involving native trees. Occasionally native trees brought back memories of homesickness. Other people remembered their first work experience at native tree nurseries.

The results were interesting and surprising in terms of the absence of well known New Zealand plant emblems. The silver fern and the Mt Cook Lily were not in the top ten. Trees rather than ferns or wildflowers dominated the list. From the "elegant, graceful, tall and stately Rimu" to the "majesty of old and proud Kauri".

A few mentioned wildflowers. The orchids such as *Pterostylis* prompted comments such as *"shy green orchids - their fragile beauty of their flowers always amaze me"*. The fragrant *Alseuosmia* was often mentioned and one person suggested that there should be whole fields of *Alseuosmia*. Rock daises, rock lilies and buttercups were frequently mentioned. The few references to native grasses was disappointing but the reference to the significant role of native grasses in the landscape made up for that. Non-flowering native plants such as the seaweeds (particularly kelp) and liverworts were mentioned by just a few. As one person said in justification for liverworts; *"I adore them"*.

The comments and explanations for individual choices were many and varied; some poetic, some very moving. With many thanks to all those who contributed, we would like to share the following examples.

Akeake. *"Under-rated - has amazing flower bracts"*. *"Beautiful foliage, colour both vibrant and soft at once"*.

Beech trees. *"the light plus the black trunks set against blue sky makes a mystical experience"*, *"Grandeur of the South Island beech forests"*, *"The sight of the mountain mists shifting through the hill sides of layered branches"*.

Cabbage tree. *"handsome plant"*. *"love the clacking sound of the leaves in the winter"*, *"great social, cultural and ecological value"*.

Carpodetus. Putaputaweta, marble leaf. *"I love the vibrant leaf colour"*

Dianella or Turutu. *"a real gem when a shaft of sunlight catches the brilliant blue berries"*.

Dracophyllum Neinei. *"the striking Dr. Zeuss plant"*, *"this one gives me most pleasure"*.

Flax. *"Simmering displays in otherwise barren areas"*. *"The perfect theatre for watching Tuis feed"*, *"it has strength"*, *"their history, uses and traditions"*, *"so mathematical and tidy"*.

Kowhai. *"always a thrill to see that splash of colour"*, *"Pureness of the colour of the flowers and it heralds spring"*.

Lancewood. *"Fierce and startling when young, intriguing when adolescent and stately when mature"*.

Libertia. *"wonderful form and colour"*, *"such pretty plants"*.

Manuka. *"the coloniser and healer of the land"*, *"On mass you can't beat it for summery blossom with that heartland New Zealand feeling"*, *"great smell"*, *"now a garden show piece"*.

Marlborough rock daisy. *"as the spring growth emerges it is like a flight of grey moths or butterflies hovering over dark greens leaves frosted with grey"*. *"The petals radiate and cluster around a golden ball of stamens, just right for summer and Christmas"*.

Mistletoe. *"Like a group of candles, they illuminate the dullest kanuka or manuka"*.

Muehlenbeckia. *"So versatile and yet so underrated as a garden plant"*

Northern rata. *"The stunning flowers , combined with bees buzzing about and birds taking shelter make for fantastic viewing"*, *"What a perfect Christmas present from Mother Nature"*.

Pohutukawa. *"beech holidays, blue sky, old and knarled"*, *"glorious blaze of colour"*. *"Adorable and symbolic - it should be used more often at Christmas"*, *"To see their huge roots clinging to the banks and covering rocks gives on a feeling of forever and a day"*.

Pongas. *"so graceful"*, *"so perfectly shaped"*, *"ethereal form"*, *"layers of symmetry"*, *"I am lost in admiration"*.

Puriri. *"flowers and fruits all year with benefits to so many forms of our native wildlife"*, *"I love the glossy leaves"*.

The 2002 top ten native plant project prompted an enthusiastic response and for many people it brought back happy memories of place or childhood experience.

However, the question was asked, is this a useful exercise and what contribution, if any, does it make to conservation? Some people (who didn't contribute to the survey) were critical and considered such a survey to be of little value and indeed rather eccentric. By way of contrast, surveys of this kind in the U.K. have a huge response and there, some surveys are directed at wild flowers and not just native plants. Why don't we celebrate our native plant heritage with as much enthusiasm as they do in the U.K? We remain convinced that the survey, if it were to be done again - perhaps annually, would contribute to a greater awareness and appreciation of our native flora.

### **The 2002 vote for the top ten New Zealand native plants:**

1. Pohutukawa
2. Cabbage tree
3. Kauri
4. Nikau palm
5. Kowhai
6. Rimu
7. Puriri
8. Flax
9. Lancewood
10. Totara