Astelia chathamica

COMMON NAME
Chatham Island astelia, Chatham Island kakaha, Moriori flax

SYNONYMS
Astelia nervosa var. chathamica Skottsb.

FAMILY
Asteliaceae

AUTHORITY
Astelia chathamica (Skottsb.) L.B.Moore

FLORA CATEGORY
Vascular – Native

ENDEMIC TAXON
Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Herbs - Monocots

NVS CODE
ASTCHA

CHROMOSOME NUMBER
2n = 70

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS
2012 | At Risk – Recovering | Qualifiers: CD, IE, RR

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES
2009 | At Risk – Recovering | Qualifiers: IE, RR
2004 | Threatened – Nationally Endangered

BRIEF DESCRIPTION
Kakaha has long flax-like leaves clad in silvery hairs. Male and female flowers are found on separate plants. The male flower stalk is very thick and bears dark green, scented flowers, while the female plant has pale, greenish-white flowers. Flowering occurs from October to December, while the orange or red fruit may be seen from February to July.

DISTRIBUTION
Endemic to the Chatham Islands where it is known from Chatham Island and Pitt Island.

HABITAT
Kakaha occupies a range of moist sites. It can be found on forest floors, cliffs, rock bluffs, lakeshore scarps and stream margins, as well as in swamps. It was formerly widespread, but now tends to be restricted to sheltered, rocky, or protected spots in the bush or scrub where it is safe from grazing.
FEATURES
Robust tufted plant. Leaves 60–200 × 4–10 cm., keeled near the sheath, less so in main part of lamina; sheath-base white, with close scales on both surfaces; lamina adaxially silvered green with a metallic sheen, covered with a thin but long-persistent clear pellicle that lifts off in strips from old leaves; abaxial surface with a pale grey satiny indumentum of appressed scales with very little wool, the single main costa on each side of midrib little if at all stronger than midrib and not prominent. Inflorescence large and erect, most parts shaggy with narrow scales at least when young; lower spathes long; racemes numerous, all spathes except the smallest subtending sub-inflorescences of 2–3 or more racemes. Flowers pedicellate and usually well-spaced; male flower pale, tepals to 8 × 2.5–3 mm., strongly reflexed soon after flower opens; perianth-tube very short, drooping around pedicel and so exposing the base of the pistillode; outer tepals scaly externally; female flower colour not known, tepals more scaly, longer and proportionately narrower than in related species. Ovary 3-locular; style rather well-developed. Fruit about 10 × 10 mm., subglobose, orange; matured perianth fleshy, the tube retroflexed and much shorter than the persistent, membranous, more or less curled-under tepals.

FLOWERING
October - December

FLOWER COLOURS
Green, White

FRUITING
February - July

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

THREATS
Browsing and physical destruction by stock and feral animals have impacted severely on this species.

ETYMOLOGY
astelia: Stemless
chathamica: From the Chatham Islands

WHERE TO BUY
Commonly available as Astelia cv. Silver Spear.

TAXONOMIC NOTES
Type locality: Chatham Island. Type: K, Travers. This appears to be the only species on Chatham Islands; earlier records of different species probably all refer to this same plant.
In most inflorescences seen the bracteoles near the tips of the racemes are long and conspicuous, projecting far beyond the flowers. In some other species this development appears sporadically rather than as a consistent specific character.

ATTRIBUTION
Fact Sheet prepared for NZPCN by P.J. de Lange 1 August 2003.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

NZPCN FACT SHEET CITATION
Please cite as: de Lange, P.J. (Year at time of access): Astelia chathamica Fact Sheet (content continuously updated). New Zealand Plant Conservation Network. https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/astelia-chathamica/ (Date website was queried)
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