

Astelia chathamica

COMMON NAMES

Chatham Island astelia, Chatham Island kakaha, Moriori flax

BIOSTATUS

Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2023 | At Risk – Declining | Qualifiers: CD, IE, RR

[Jump to previous conservation statuses](#)

CATEGORY

Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS

Herbs - Monocots

SIMPLIFIED 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.

FLOWER COLOURS

Green, White

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

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.

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.

THREATS

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



Chatham Islands. Photographer: John Sawyer, Licence: CC BY-NC.



Astelia chathamica, closeup of red fruited form, Te One. Photographer: Peter J de Lange, Licence: CC BY-NC.

GENUS

Astelia

FAMILY

Asteliaceae

AUTHORITY

Astelia chathamica (Skottsb.) L.B.Moore

SYNONYMS

Astelia nervosa var. *chathamica* Skottsb.

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.

ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

FLOWERING

October - December

FRUITING

February - July

LIFE CYCLE AND DISPERSAL

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

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING

FAC: Facultative

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

CULTIVATION

Commonly available as *Astelia* cv. Silver Spear.

ETYMOLOGY

astelia: Stemless

chathamica: From the Chatham Islands

NVS CODE

ASTCHA

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

2n = 70

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | At Risk – Recovering | Qualifiers: CD, IE, RR

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

2009 | At Risk – Recovering | Qualifiers: IE, RR

2004 | Threatened – Nationally Endangered

[Jump to current conservation status](#)

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Moore, L.B.; Edgar, E. 1970: Flora of New Zealand. Volume II. Indigenous Tracheophyta: Monocotyledones except Gramineae. Wellington, N. Z. pg. 34.

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 2009 Vol. 11 No. 4 pp. 285-309.

Walls, G.; Baird, A.; de Lange, P.J.; Sawyer, J.W.D. 2002: Threatened plants of the Chatham Islands. Wellington, Department of Conservation.

ATTRIBUTION

Fact Sheet prepared for NZPCN by P.J. de Lange 1 August 2003. Description adapted by M. Ward from Moore & Edgar (1970).

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NZPCN FACT SHEET CITATION

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MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/astelia-chathamica/>

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