Cenchrus clandestinus

COMMON NAMES
kikuyu grass

BIOSTATUS
Exotic

CONSERVATION STATUS
Not applicable

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Grasses

FLOWER COLOURS
Red/Pink, White

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Creeping, perennial, hairy, mat-forming grass. **Stolons** very long, climbing supported occ to 2+ m, rooting frequently. **Rhizomes** long. **Leaves** alternate, 5–40 × 3–9 cm, bright green to yellow-green, soft and drooping, sparsely hairy above and below, blades folded, ligule a fringe of hairs, auricle missing. **Sheath** pale green to white, with soft 2–4 mm hairs. **Seedhead** of 2–3 tiny spikelets in upper leaf sheaths, wispy anthers and stigmas

SIMILAR TAXA
The creeping aggressive growth form is familiar to most people especially in Northern areas. It is most similar to *Stenotaphrum secundatum* (buffalo grass) but lacks the distinctive seed heads of this species. In fact the flowers of kikuyu are small and cryptic so are rarely seen.

HABITAT
Terrestrial. A coastal plant of high fertile sites (Timmins & MacKenzie 1995). A plant that prefers warm, moist and fertile soils, but is drought resistant (Department of Conservation 1996). A plant of sand dunes (Timmins & MacKenzie 1995). A plant that is a common dominant pasture grass (Department of Conservation 1996). A plant that is invasive in coastal areas (Department of Conservation 1996).

GENUS
Cenchrus

FAMILY
Poaceae

AUTHORITY
Cenchrus clandestinus (Hochst. ex Chiov.) Morrone

SYNONYMS
Pennisetum clandestinum Chiov.

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

Cenchrus clandestinus, leafy shoot. Photographer: John Smith-Dodsworth, Licence: CC BY-NC.

Cenchrus clandestinus, stigmas. Photographer: John Smith-Dodsworth, Licence: CC BY-NC.

YEAR NATURALISED
1936

ORIGIN
Tropical and southern Africa, E. Africa, N. Africa, Kenya.

REASON FOR INTRODUCTION
Agricultural

TOLERANCES
The plant that is very tolerant of drought, slightly tolerant of frost and tolerant of poor drainage (Timmins & MacKenzie 1995). Physical damage and grazing result in resrouting from underground rhizomes (Timmins & MacKenzie 1995). Requires high soil fertility (Atkinson 1997).

LIFE CYCLE AND DISPERSAL
Perennial. The plant reproduces vegetatively through the resprouting of rhizomatous fragments (Timmins & MacKenzie 1995; Department of Conservation 1996). Plant produces seed in NZ (Department of Conservation 1996). Seed is wind dispersed (Timmins & MacKenzie 1995). Dispersal is aided by grazing animals (seed?) (Department of Conservation 1996).

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING
FACU: Facultative Upland
Occasionally is a hydrophyte but usually occurs in uplands (non-wetlands).

ETYMOLOGY
cenchrus: From the Greek cenchros which means millet

ENVIRONMENTAL WEED (2024)
This plant is named in a list of 386 environmental weeds in New Zealand 2024 prepared by DOC. 759 candidate species were considered for inclusion on this new comprehensive list of environmental weeds in New Zealand. The species considered were drawn from published lists of weed species, lists of plants that must be reported or managed by law if observed, existing national and regional programmes and agreements for pest management, and species already managed by the Department of Conservation (DOC). Candidate species were then assessed to see if they were fully naturalised and whether they have more than minor impacts in natural ecosystems. Read the full report here.

NVS CODE
CENCLA

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING
Atkinson IAE. 1997. Problem weeds on New Zealand islands. *Science for Conservation 45*. Department of Conservation, Wellington, NZ. 58 p.
Esler, A.E. 1998. The clandestine flowering of Kikuyu grass. *Auckland Botanical Society Journal 53*: 62–64.
Little, C. 1999. Kikuyu a further note. *Auckland Botanical Society Journal 54*: 13.
Timmins SM, Mackenzie IW. 1995. Weeds in New Zealand Protected Natural Areas database. *Department of Conservation Technical Series 8*. Department of Conservation, Wellington, NZ. 282 p.

MORE INFORMATION
https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/cenchrus-clandestinus/

PDF DATE
25 May 2026