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
CORPAUS

CHROMOSOME NUMBER
2n = 38

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS
2012 | Not Threatened

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES
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.
FEATURES
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. obtecta (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 Myoplast 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 failing 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”).
REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

NZPCN FACT SHEET CITATION
(Date website was queried)

MORE INFORMATION