Corynocarpus laevigatus

COMMON NAMES
karaka, kopi

BIOSTATUS
Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS
2023 | Not Threatened
Jump to previous conservation statuses

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Trees & Shrubs - Dicotyledons

SIMPLIFIED DESCRIPTION
Large tree about as wide as tall with many thick dark green glossy leaves and large oval orange fruit. Bark dark, with dark spots on trunk. Leaves 10-20cm long, paler underneath. Fruit to 4cm long, oval, in dense sprays, flesh thin.



Ripe fruit, Ship Cove. Photographer: Simon Walls, Date taken: 01/02/2008, Licence: CC BY-NC.

FLOWER COLOURS
Cream, Green

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Leafy canopy tree up 15 m tall. Trunk stout up to 1 m diam., Bark grey. Branches stout, erect to spreading. Petioles 10-15 mm long. Leaves dark green above paler beneath, thick, leathery, (50-)100-150(-200) x (30-)50-70 mm, glossy, elliptic to obovate-oblong, margins recurved. Inflorescence a stout, erect panicle up to 200 mm long, peduncles and pedicels short, somewhat fleshy, pale green. Flowers 4-5 mm diam., greenish-cream to off-white or pale yellow. Sepals suborbicular, petals 5, obovate-spathulate, alternating with 5 subpetaloid staminodes. Fruit an ellipsoid to ovoid drupe 25-40(-46) mm long, flesh pale yellow to orange. Endocarp a fibrous reticulum surrounding a smoother, harder papery layer beneath. This structure enclosing a single seed (kernel).



Cathedral Cove, Coromandel. Photographer: John Sawyer, Date taken: 01/08/2013, Licence: CC BY-NC.

SIMILAR TAXA
Karaka is a very distinctive tree unlikely to be confused with any other indigenous, naturalised or planted exotic tree. The simply, leathery, dark green leaves and large orange drupes with their fibrous endocarp serve to immediately distinguish it. Some Botanic Gardens hold specimens of the other 4 species of the genus, vegetatively these look similar to karaka but their fruits are very different in colour, shape and size.

DISTRIBUTION
Endemic. Exact indigenous distribution uncertain due to its widespread historic planting by Maori. Common from Raoul and the Three Kings Islands, throughout the North and South Islands to Banks Peninsula and Okarito. Also on the Chatham Islands. Most botanists accept it as native only to the northern half of the North Island. It is widely naturalised in lowland forests, from gardens and ‘conservation plantings’ well south of its presumed natural range. Seedlings can form dense carpets to the exclusion of other native regeneration (Costal et al. 2006). It is probably naturalised from deliberate Polynesian plantings on Raoul and the Chatham Islands.

HABITAT
Common in mainly coastal situations, often a major component of coastal forest, rarely dominant. Occasionally found inland, and then often in association with Maori cultural deposits.

THREATS
Abundant and not threatened. Often naturalising in suitable habitats.

GENUS
Corynocarpus

FAMILY
Corynocarpaceae

AUTHORITY
Corynocarpus laevigatus J.R.Forst. et G.Forst.

SYNONYMS
None

ENDEMIC TAXON
Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
August - November

FRUITING
January - April

LIFE CYCLE AND DISPERSAL
Fleshy drupes are dispersed by frugivory (Thorsen et al., 2009).

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE
Easily grown from fresh seed. Cuttings are very difficult to strike. Frost-tender and cold-sensitive when young.

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

POISONOUS PLANT
The fleshy outer part of the fruit can be eaten but the kernel in which the seed occur is poisonous (a neurotoxin known as karakin) unless detoxified through cooking. Symptoms include nausea, vomiting and seizures. There may also be the onset of muscular spasms after several weeks. Click on this link for more information about Poisonous native plants.

CULTIVATION
Common in cultivation and widely sold both in New Zealand and around the world. A serious pest in the Hawaiian Islands. Because the fresh kernels of the species contain a lethal neurotoxin Karakin, and so the species has been banned from some amenity plantings and day care and kindergartens. The toxin, an alkaloid breaks down with exposure to UV light.

CULTURAL USE/IMPORTANCE
Karaka (or kopi) holds significant cultural and historical value for Māori and Moriori, but it is also viewed as an environmental weed outside its natural range due to its capacity to outcompete resident native vegetation and disrupt local ecosystems. For a detaile discussion see McAlpine et al. (2024) Karaka (*Corynocarpus laevigatus*): native taonga (treasure) or environmental weed? *New Zealand Journal of Botany*, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/0028825X.2024.2388751.

ETYMOLOGY
corynocarpus: From the Greek koryne ‘club’ and –carpus ‘fruit’
laevigatus: Smooth

NVS CODE
CORLAE

CHROMOSOME NUMBER
2n = 44

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES
2017 | Not Threatened
2012 | Not Threatened
2009 | Not Threatened
2004 | Not Threatened
Jump to current conservation status

REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES
Auckland: 2025 | Regionally Not Threatened | Qualifiers: DPS, DPT Help
The regional threat classification system leverages off the national assessments in the NZTCS, providing information relevant for the regional context. Auckland conservation status information is sourced from the "Conservation status of vascular plant species in Tāmaki Makaurau / Auckland" Simpkins E et al. (2025) report.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING
Allan, H.H. 1961: Flora of New Zealand. Vol. 1. Wellington, Government Printer.
J.A. Costall , R.J. Carter , Y. Shimada , D. Anthony & G. L. Rapson (2006). The endemic tree Corynocarpus laevigatus (karaka) as a weedy invader in forest remnants of southern North Island, New Zealand, *New Zealand Journal of Botany*, 44:1, 5-22, DOI:10.1080/0028825X.2006.9513002

ATTRIBUTION
Fact Sheet prepared for NZPCN by P.J. de Lange (1 September 2004). Description based on Allan (1961).
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MORE INFORMATION
https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/corynocarpus-laevigatus/

PDF DATE
09 July 2026