Dracophyllum arboreum

COMMON NAMES
Chatham Island grass tree, tarahinau

BIOSTATUS
Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS
2023 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: IE, Inc
Jump to previous conservation statuses

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Trees & Shrubs - Dicotyledons

SIMPLIFIED DESCRIPTION
Tree up to 18 m tall (known only from the Chatham islands), leaves, green, grass-like of two types (broad juvenile and narrow adult), with adult specimens bearing white flowers borne in spikes and often partially obscured by persistent hard and sharp–tipped floral bracts

FLOWER COLOURS
Red/Pink, White

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Tree 4–18 m tall. Bark on old branches greyish–brown to brown, finely fissured, young stems yellowish to reddish brown. Leaves dimorphic (juvenile and adult); juvenile leaves crowded at tips of branches, spreading; lamina sheath 9.0–17.0 × 7.4–16.6 mm, yellowish to light green, coriaceous, tapering and margin ciliate or ciliate in upper half only; lamina subcoriaceous to coriaceous, 100–220 × 10–18 mm, linear–triangular, surfaces glabrous, margins densely pubescent; adult leaves spreading; lamina sheath 6–12 × 4–12 mm, light green, membranous, tapering with a ciliate margin; lamina 25–90 × 1–2 mm, linear to linear–triangular, surfaces glabrous with a tuft of scabrid hairs at base of adaxial surface; margins densely pubescent. Inflorescence a terminal spike on lateral branchlets, shorter than leaves, erect to drooping, dense, 15–38 mm long, linear–oblong; inflorescence bract overtopping the flower, 18–20 × 3–5 mm, subulate, surfaces glabrous, adaxial surface pubescent at base, margins ciliate. Flowers 4–9, sessile; flower bract persistent, overtopping flowers, foliose, 5.5–9.0 × 2.5–3.0 mm, ovate to broadly ovate, surfaces glabrous, adaxial surface with a tuft of scabrid hair at apex; margins ciliate. Sepals 4.0–7.0 × 2.5–3.0 mm, ovate lanceolate, longer than corolla tube, surfaces glabrous with the top half pubescent; margins ciliate. Corolla white; corolla tube 4–5 × 2.5–3.0 mm, cylindrical; corolla lobes reflexed, 2.0–2.4 × 1.0–2.0 mm, triangular, shorter than corolla tube; apices acute; adaxial surface papillate. Stamens inserted on corolla tube in upper third, filaments 0.3–1.0 mm long; anthers included, 0.3–0.4 mm long, oblong, light yellow. Ovary 1.7–2.0 × 1.0–2.0 mm, obovate; glabrous, apex round; nectary scales, 1.0–1.2 × 0.5–0.8 mm, oblong, apices irregularly toothed; style included, 2.0–2.5 mm long, glabrous; stigma capitate. Fruit sessile, 1.2–1.5 × 1.0–1.5 mm, oblong, apex round, dark brown, glabrous. Seed 0.6–0.65 mm long, ovoid, yellowish brown, testa slightly reticulate.



Juvenile foliage, Chatham Island. Photographer: Bill Clarkson, Date taken: 17/05/2007, Licence: CC BY-NC.



Chatham Island. Photographer: Bill Clarkson, Date taken: 17/05/2007, Licence: CC BY-NC.

SIMILAR TAXA
Dracophyllum arboreum is a distinctive and easily recognised species, well marked by its tree-habit (growing up to 18 m tall), long and broad juvenile leaves with adult leaves densely ciliated on the margins and pubescent at the base, persistent hard and sharp–tipped bracts that are broad with long white hairs on the adaxial surface, and by the corolla tube 4–5 mm long and shorter than the sepals (and with long cilia on the lower surface). Dracophyllum arboreum can be confused with D. scoparium, especially when it grows on the margins of the restiad bogs D. scoparium favours. From D. scoparium, D. arboreum differs by its taller tree habit, much larger, yellow-green rather than bronze-green to red-green, juvenile foliage, which is often carried through as reversion shoots on adult trees, and by the upper leaf surface which is pubescent rather than tomentose. Dracophyllum scoparium is confined to restiad bogs where it forms shrubs up to 2 m high. In disturbed habitats it frequently hybridises with D. arboreum.

DISTRIBUTION
Endemic. Chatham Islands (Rekohu (Chatham), Rangiuria (Pitt) and Rangatira (South East) Islands)

HABITAT
Dracophyllum arboreum is an important component of Chatham Island forest, especially away from the coast and on the deeper peaty soils. In these sites it is often the dominant tree. Sometimes found in restiad bog where it overlaps with and often forms hybrids with D. scoparium Hook.f.

THREATS
Reasonably secure and regarded as not threatened. However populations off protected land are vulnerable to clearance for farmland and fires. Many populations in the northern two thirds of the main island are remnant stands on farmed land and are in decline. Despite this tarahinau is abundant over much of the southern table lands and on Pitt Island.

GENUS
Dracophyllum

FAMILY
Ericaceae

AUTHORITY
Dracophyllum arboreum Cockayne

SYNONYMS
Dracophyllum latifolium var. ciliolatum Hook. f.; Dracophyllum scoparium var. major Cheeseman

ENDEMIC TAXON
Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
Throughout the year

FRUITING
Throughout the year

LIFE CYCLE AND DISPERSAL
Minute seeds are wind dispersed (Thorsen et al., 2009).

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE
Can be grown from fresh seed. However tricky to maintain. An attractive species that flourishes best in acidic, permanently damp but not water logged peaty soils.

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING

FACW: Facultative Wetland
Usually is a hydrophyte but occasionally found in uplands (non-wetlands).

ETYMOLOGY

dracophyllum: Dragon leaf, from its likeness to the dragon tree of the Canary Islands
arboreum: Tree-like

NVS CODE

DRAARB

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

2n = 26

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: IE, Inc
2012 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: IE, Inc
2009 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: IE
2004 | Range Restricted
Jump to current conservation status

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Venter, S. 2009: A taxonomic revision of the genus Dracophyllum Labill. (Ericaceae). Unpublished Phd Thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington.
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 11: 285-309

ATTRIBUTION

Fact sheet prepared for NZPCN by P.J. de Lange (4 October 2012). Description adapted from Venter (2009) supplemented by author's own observations and measurements.

NZPCN FACT SHEET CITATION

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https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/dracophyllum-arboreum/ (Date website was queried)

MORE INFORMATION

https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/dracophyllum-arboreum/

PDF DATE

21 July 2026