Dracophyllum townsonii

BIOSTATUS
Native – Endemic taxon

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

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Trees & Shrubs - Dicotyledons

SIMPLIFIED DESCRIPTION
Erect spindly tree with tufts of grass-like curved leaves on long curved branches inhabiting Northwest Nelson. Leaves 130-300mm long by 4.5-12mm wide, young leaves pink. Flowers white, in clusters often hidden by leaves.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
A shrub or small tree, 3–6 m tall. Branches form an open candelabrum–shaped crown. Bark on old branches greyish brown to light brown, flaky, young stems reddish brown. Leaves crowded at tips of branches in a bromelioid manner, spirally arranged on young stems, young leaves distinctly pink coloured; lamina sheath light green, 15–25 × 8–22 mm, coriaceous, striate, tapering, margins membranous with the top half ciliate; lamina linear–triangular, 130.0–300.0 × 4.5–12.0 mm, surfaces glabrous, prominently striated; margins cartilaginous, serrate with 28–50 teeth per 10 mm. Inflorescence an axillary panicle situated below the leaves; shorter than the leaves, curved and drooping, dense, 40–130 mm long, pyramidal and sparingly branched; rachis and pedicels hirsute, light green; inflorescence axis, 2.2–4.2 mm in diameter; basal inflorescence branch 10–24 mm long, suberect; inflorescence bracts caducous, over-topping flowers, whitish in lower half, ovate at base, 40–50 × 10–12 mm, glabrous, margins ciliate. Flowers hidden by leaves, 30–90, in groups of 5–10 at base of inflorescence, pedicellate; bracteoles persistent, both bracteoles longer than the perianth and situated in the middle of the pedicel, 2.5–7.0 × 0.3–1.0 mm, glabrous; pedicels 0.2–0.5 mm long, pubescent. Sepals green, broadly ovate, 2.5–4.0 × 1.7–2.5 mm, shorter than corolla tube, striate, surfaces glabrous; margins ciliate in upper half. Corolla red; corolla tube campanulate, widened at mouth, 2.0–2.5 × 2.3–2.5 mm; corolla lobes reflexed, oblong, shorter than or equalling corolla tube, 1.9–2.0 × 1.0–1.2 mm; glabrous; apices obtuse; surfaces glabrous. Stamens inserted in upper third of corolla tube, filaments 1–2 mm long; anthers exserted, rectangular, light yellow and 1.3–1.5 mm long. Ovary subglobose, 1.3–1.5 × 2.0–2.5 mm; glabrous, apex round; nectary scales rectangular, 0.4–0.5 × 0.8–1.0 mm, apex retuse to irregularly toothed; style exserted, 1.5–2.0 mm long, glabrous; stigma capitate. Fruit light to reddish brown, 2–3 mm long and wide, depressed–globose, apex round and glabrous. Seeds light brown, ovoid, 1.1–1.3 mm long, testa slightly reticulate.



Dracophyllum townsonii. Photographer: David A. Norton, Licence: CC BY-NC.

SIMILAR TAXA
Dracophyllum townsonii is distinguished from other allied species by the open candelabra–shaped crown, crowded leaves at the end of branches growing in a bromelioid manner, distinctly pink coloured young leaves, small panicle (40–130 mm long) always situated below the leaves, flowers arranged in groups of 5–10 on the basal inflorescence branches, inflorescence bracts broad and contracted into subulate apices, campanulate corolla, sepals being shorter than the corolla tube, sharply reflexed corolla lobes and the exserted anthers. Within its range Dracophyllum townsonii is similar to D. menziesii from which it differs by its small tree habit, open candelabra–shaped crown, flaky rather than smooth bark, much longer inflorescence (40–50 mm compared to 50–150 mm) and by the flowers which are arranged in groups of 5–10 not three on the basal inflorescence branches. In D. townsonii the bracteole is persistent and equals the flower in length (not shorter) while the corolla tube is shorter (2.0–2.5 mm compared to 6–7 mm) with the anthers exserted not included. The ovary of D. townsonii is subglobose not obovate, and the style is shorter than that of D. menziesii (1.5–2.0 mm compared to 2.5–3.5 mm). The seeds of D. townsonii are also longer than those of D. menziesii (1.1–1.3 mm compared to 0.55–0.6 mm).

DISTRIBUTION
Endemic. New Zealand: South Island (North–West Nelson from Whanganui Inlet to Hokitika).

HABITAT
Dracophyllum townsonii is a species inhabiting moist areas in montane forest and shrubland along ridge lines, slopes and drainage lines, at elevations ranging from 152–900 m. It is typically an understorey species but it occasionally colonises open areas such as around tree falls, on slip scars or along logging tracks.

GENUS
Dracophyllum

FAMILY
Ericaceae

AUTHORITY
Dracophyllum townsonii Cheeseman

ENDEMIC TAXON
Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
December – March

FRUITING
February - June

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

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE
Difficult. Should not be removed from the wild. Don’t be tempted - take photographs instead! Dracophyllum townsonii is very occasionally stocked by specialist nurseries (take care though to check the soil surrounding the rootstock to see if the plants on offer have been dug from the wild, as plants dug from the wild often persist for a few months before dying), and if grown from seed such plants may occasionally thrive in cultivation. Does best in a semi-shaded site, planted in a humus enriched, moist (not water logged) soil.

CULTIVATION
Occasionally available from specialist native plant nurseries.

ETYMOLOGY

dracophyllum: Dragon leaf, from its likeness to the dragon tree of the Canary Islands
townsonii: Honours William L. Townson (1855-1926)

NVS CODE

DRATOW

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

2n = 26

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | Not Threatened
2012 | Not Threatened
2009 | Not Threatened
2004 | Not Threatened
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
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 April 2012). Description adapted from Venter (2009)

MORE INFORMATION

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

PDF DATE

27 May 2026