

Epilobium hirtigerum

COMMON NAMES

hairy willowherb

BIOSTATUS

Native

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2023 | Not Threatened | Qualifiers: EF, SO

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CATEGORY

Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS

Herbs - Dicotyledons other than Composites

FLOWER COLOURS

Red/Pink, White

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Robust perennial, stoloniferous, dull grey to grey-green, reddish tinged herb, 0.2–1.8 m tall. **Plants** distinctly hairy, all parts except petals densely covered in long spreading, and short erect, eglandular, greyish hairs; hairs of inflorescence glandular. **Stems** usually unbranched; woody near base. **Stolons** numerous (especially in winter), arising from base of stems, and sometimes from rootstock, dark red, glabrescent. **Stolon leaves** bright green, streaked, tinged or blotched dark red, glabrous, 50–80 × 10–40 mm, broadly ovate, to elliptic, base oblique to broadly cuneate, sometimes attenuate, apex acute to obtuse, sometimes rounded, margins coarsely and ± evenly serrated, teeth up to 18 on each side; lateral veins 2–4 each side of midrib, conspicuous. **Leaves of stems and inflorescences** alternate except near base where opposite, glaucous, hairy; 15–60 × 2–8 mm, linear to narrowly lanceolate, base acute or acuminate, apex acuminate, margins coarsely serrate, sometimes undulate, teeth 0–12 on each side, evenly distributed or concentrated toward leaf apex; lateral veins 2–4 each side of midrib, usually inconspicuous. **Inflorescence** erect. **Flowers** erect, up to 16 mm diameter. **Pedicel** 0–70 mm long. **Ovaries** 14–30 mm long, invested with spreading, appressed, glandular hairs. **Sepals** keeled, 2.5–5.3 × 0.8–1.0 mm, invested with spreading, appressed, glandular hairs. **Floral tube** 0.5–0.9 mm deep. 1.0–1.5 mm diameter at apex, internally bearing a conspicuous ring of long white hairs. **Petals** white (North Island and South Island) or rose-pink (South Island), 2.8–8.0 × 1.8–5.2 mm wide, notched, notch 0.6–1.8 mm deep, petals of white-flowered plants often shorter than sepals, scarcely spreading apart at anthesis, petals of rose-pink-flowered plants longer than sepals, spreading widely at anthesis. **Stamens** 8, of two lengths, 4 longer (0.8–4.0 mm) and 4 shorter (0.3–0.5 mm); anthers 0.5–1.2 × 0.3–0.5 mm, cream. **Stigma** rarely positioned above lower set of stamens; style 1.2–4.2 mm long, white, basally invested in long hairs; stigma clavate, 0.6–2.4 × 0.6–0.9 mm. **Capsules** on pedicels 6–15 mm long; narrowly cylindrical, 35–60 mm long, densely pubescent with both long, spreading, appressed, eglandular, and shorter, erect, glandular hairs. **Seeds** 0.9–1.1 × 0.5 mm, orange-brown, obovoid, papillose; coma easily detached, 5–8 mm long, white.



Epilobium hirtigerum showing the distinctive foliage produced by the basal stolons.
Photographer: Peter J de Lange, Licence: CC BY-NC.



In cultivation. Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe,
Date taken: 21/10/2007, Licence: CC BY.

SIMILAR TAXA

Hairy willow herb is most often confused with *Epilobium cinereum* which is commonly found growing in the same habitats. *Epilobium cinereum* differs from hairy willow herb by its smaller, spreading rather than erect growth habit, non-dimorphic, smaller (up to 40 × 7 mm), coarsely toothed leaves, larger (up to 20 mm wide), consistently dark rose-purple flowers than open widely, and slightly smaller (0.8–1 mm) seeds.

DISTRIBUTION

Indigenous. New Zealand: North Island, South Island, Chatham Islands. Also Australia, Indonesia and South America.

HABITAT

Coastal, lowland to montane. A short-lived species of open ground, seepages on cliff faces, sparsely-vegetated wetland margins, braided riverbeds, lake edges, and swamps. Now most common in urban areas and associated wasteland.

THREATS

Most records since the 1990s are from urban situations, country roadsides, within coastal areas or under willow (*Salix* spp.) along river banks. Plants are usually in wasteland, often within new housing developments, bordering drains, within old quarry pits or growing in cliff seepages. A common habitat is car parks, traffic islands and roadside gutters. In these sites some quite large populations have been destroyed by housing, road works and through competition from large, faster growing weeds. However, overall it now seems clear that this species is increasing its range rather than in decline.

GENUS

Epilobium

FAMILY

Onagraceae

AUTHORITY

Epilobium hirtigerum A.Cunn.

SYNONYMS

Epilobium junceum G.Forst. var. *hirtigerum* (A.Cunn.)Curtis, *E. junceum* sensu Hook.f. pro parte, *E. tetragonum* L. *E. brasiliense* Hausskn., *E. sarmentaceum* sensu Back. et Bakh., *E. cinereum* sensu Raven prop parte.

ENDEMIC TAXON

No

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

FLOWERING

September–May

FRUITING

November–June

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE

Easily grown from seed and rooted pieces of stem. Prefers full sun and does best in damp ground. Despite its scarcity in the wild, in cultivation this species can quickly become invasive.

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING

FAC: Facultative

Commonly occurs as either a hydrophyte or non-hydrophyte (non-wetlands).

EXTRA INFORMATION

Most New Zealand plants have white flowers, with only a few instances of rose-purple coloured flowers (the more usual colour form in Australia) are known.

ETYMOLOGY

epilobium: From the Greek epi- 'upon' and lobos 'a pod', the flowers appearing to be growing on the seed pod.

NVS CODE

EPIHIR

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

2n = 36

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | At Risk – Recovering | Qualifiers: EF, SO

2012 | Threatened – Nationally Critical | Qualifiers: DP, EF, SO

2009 | Threatened – Nationally Critical | Qualifiers: DP, EF, SO

2004 | Data Deficient

[Jump to current conservation status](#)

REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES

Auckland: 2025 | Regionally Not Threatened | Qualifiers: DPR, INC, NStr, SO 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

Raven PH, Raven TE. 1976. The genus *Epilobium* in Australasia. *New Zealand DSIR Bulletin 216*. Government Printer, Wellington, NZ. 321 p.

Webb CJ, Simpson MJA. 2001. *Seeds of New Zealand Gymnosperms and Dicotyledons*. Manuka Press, Christchurch. 428 p.

ATTRIBUTION

Fact sheet first prepared for NZPCN by P.J. de Lange 6 January 2008. Description adapted from Raven & Raven (1976) and Webb & Simpson (2001).

MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/epilobium-hirtigerum/>

PDF DATE

27 May 2026