Gahnia xanthocarpa

COMMON NAMES
gahnia, māpere

BIOSTATUS
Native – Endemic taxon

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

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Sedges

FLOWER COLOURS
Brown, Red/Pink

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Robust perennial sedge arising from a lignaceous rootstock up to 30 mm diameter and forming densely tufted dark green tussocks up to 3.5 m tall. **Culms** 10 mm diameter (but up to 15 mm diameter at the base). **Leaves** slightly ≤ culms, not usually overtopping the panicle; lamina dark glossy green above, paler beneath, surfaces harshly scabrid, margins involute, ciliate just above the transverse line demarcating the sheath from the lamina, becoming more intensely scabrid higher up with a few longitudinal rows of teeth just inside the margin on the lamina undersides; sheaths dull, light pinkish brown, glabrous up to 40 mm wide. **Panicles** set well above foliage, drooping, 0.6–1.5 m long, heavily branched, primary branchlets up to 450 mm long. **Spikelets** 2-flowered, c. 8 mm long, numerous, densely crowded, stalked, light chestnut-brown. **Glumes** 6–7; outer 3–4 empty, more or less equal, 7–8 mm long; inner 3 glumes smaller, 5–6 mm long, red-brown, or green-brown below and red brown towards apices. **Stamens** 4, bright red-brown. **Style-branches** 3–4. **Nut** 5–6 × 2–3 mm, fusiform, bright yellow maturing glossy black when fully ripe, sometimes slightly grooved, shortly stipitate, with alight orange-brown, obtuse, pubescent apex; endocarp transversely grooved within.

SIMILAR TAXA
Gahnia xanthocarpa could only ever be confused with the other giants of the New Zealand species *G. setifolia* (A. Rich.) Hook.f. and *G. rigida* Kirk. *Gahnia xanthocarpa* frequently grows with *G. setifolia* from which it is easily distinguished by its glossy dark green leaves, reddish brown spikelets which are > 7 mm long and dark glossy black nuts which are > 5 mm long. *Gahnia xanthocarpa* rarely grows with *G. rigida* from which it is easily distinguished by its drooping rather than rigidly erect panicle and dark glossy black nuts.

DISTRIBUTION
Endemic. North Island (from Te Paki south to Wellington but uncommon, or absent over some parts of this range), South Island (Nelson, Marlborough, Westland and Canterbury—where it is very uncommon).

Pinehaven, Upper Hutt. Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken: 29/12/2004, Licence: CC BY.

HABITAT
Coastal to montane (up to 800 m a.s.l., possibly more). Occupying a diverse range of habitats and vegetation associations, *Gahnia xanthocarpa* seems to prefer permanently damp situations within alluvial forest, swamp forest and the margins of lowland swamps, bogs and waterways.

GENUS
Gahnia

FAMILY
Cyperaceae

AUTHORITY
Gahnia xanthocarpa (Hook.f.) Hook.f.

SYNONYMS
Lampocarya xanthocarpa Hook.f.; Gahnia ebenocarpa Hook.f. ex Kirk; Claudium xanthocarpum (Hook.f.) F.Muell.; Gahnia setifolia (A.Rich.) Hook.f. var. xanthocarpa (Hook.f.) Kük.

ENDEMIC TAXON
Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
January–April

FRUITING
Fruits may be found throughout the year

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

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE
Can be difficult to cultivate. The seed is difficult to germinate, and plants resent root disturbance and usually die if transplanted. However, considerable success has been achieved growing plants and/or germinating seed in untreated saw dust. Despite these problems this is an attractive species well worth attempting to grow. Once established it flourishes in a range of conditions but does best planted in a permanently damp, humus-rich soil.

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING
FAC: Facultative
Commonly occurs as either a hydrophyte or non-hydrophyte (non-wetlands).

EXTRA INFORMATION
There seems to be no basis for records of this species from Fiji and the New Hebrides. Lord Howe plants have recently been separated as a distinct endemic species *Gahnia howense* R.O.Gardner.

PLANT OF THE MONTH
This plant has been featured as a Plant of the Month – see Trilepidea: NZPCN newsletter for March 2009 for the full story.

ETYMOLOGY

gahnia: After Gahn

xanthocarpa: The specific epithet xanthocarpa literally 'yellow-fruit' is inappropriate and was given by accident because the type material is of a specimen J.D. Hooker did not realise was bearing immature nuts which in this species are bright yellow. When the nuts of this species mature they are diagnostically dark glossy black.

NVS CODE

GAHXAN

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

Gardner RO. 1995. Identifying *Gahnia setifolia* and *G. xanthocarpa*. *Auckland Botanical Society Journal 50*: 82–83.
Moore LB, Edgar E. 1970. Flora of New Zealand, Volume II. Indigenous Tracheophyta: Monocotyledones except Gramineae. Government Printer, Wellington, NZ. 354 p.
Thorsen MJ, Dickinson KJM, Seddon PJ. 2009. Seed dispersal systems in the New Zealand flora. *Perspectives in Plant Ecology, Evolution and Systematics 11*: 285–309.

ATTRIBUTION

MORE INFORMATION

https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/gahnia-xanthocarpa/

PDF DATE

25 May 2026