

Melicytus obovatus

BIOSTATUS

Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2023 | At Risk – Declining | Qualifiers: Sp, DPS, DPT, RR

[Jump to previous conservation statuses](#)

CATEGORY

Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS

Trees & Shrubs - Dicotyledons

SIMPLIFIED DESCRIPTION

A shrub with leaves that vary depending on location and age of plant inhabiting the Cook Strait and Takaka regions. Twigs speckled. Leaves to 5 cm long, network of veins more visible on the paler underside, edges either smooth or wavy. Flowers small, bell-shaped, hanging. Fruit white blotched with purple.

FLOWER COLOURS

White, Cream, Purple, Green

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Dioecious. Erect to spreading shrub up to 4 metres tall, occasionally becoming tree up to 6.5 metres tall. **Trunk(s)** up to 20 cm diameter. **Bark** smooth, grey. **Branchlets** light-green to grey-green, glabrous to pubescent when young. Petioles 1.5-10.0 mm long. **Leaves** dimorphic, younger and shaded leaves are larger than mature foliage especially if mature leaves are in an exposed situation; adult leaves (12-)35-110 × (6-)9-23 mm, mid-green to dark-green, dull to satin surface, elliptic-oblong or narrowly obovate-oblong to narrowly obovate, margin 1-2 serrate teeth towards distal end, tip slightly notched, lower surface has stomata present. Inflorescence 1-4 arising from old leaves or petiole scars.

Flowers solitary or in fascicle of 2, male flower borne decurved pedicel 1-2.5 mm long, sepals 5, triangular, purple margin, corolla barrel shaped, 3.5-4.5 × 2.5-4.5 mm, petals 4-5, up to 4 mm long, obovate-oblong, cream – pale orange-yellow, margin distinctly purple, anther 1-1.5 mm long, pollen pale yellow; female flower borne decurved pedicel 1.5-1.7 mm long, sepals 5, triangular, purple margin, corolla barrel shaped, 3.0-4.7 × 2.7-5 mm, petals 4-5, up to 3.9 mm long, obovate-oblong, pale yellow to lemon yellow, margin distinctly purple, white at base, barren anther 0.6-0.7 mm long, stigmas 2, spreading, off white or greenish white, ovary 1.2-1.8 mm long, greenish-white. **Fruit** 6-7.5 × 5.3-7 mm, ovoid, starting green maturing white and mottled with grey blue-black. **Seeds** 1 or 2, ovoid to elliptic depending on number per fruit, grey or dark grey with black markings.



Melicytus obovatus (September flowers).
Photographer: John Smith-Dodsworth, Licence: CC BY-NC.



Takaka Hill. Photographer: John Smith-Dodsworth, Licence: CC BY-NC.

SIMILAR TAXA

Most similar to *Melicytus orarius*, which is usually a smaller shrub usually 2.5 metres tall, occasionally up to 4 metres tall. The leaves *M. orarius* (compared to *M. obovatus*) are usually not as long in *M. orarius* 16-52mm (compared to 35-110mm), have 1 tooth per margin (compared to 1-2), and the leaf tip is distinctly notched (compared to slightly notched). The flowers are similar in each species, though those of *M. orarius* are hermaphrodite not dioecious.

Melicytus improceras can be differentiated from *M. obovatus* by the smaller and denser habit up to 1.2 metres tall. The leaves are smaller, with a noticeably notched tip. The flowers lack a distinctly purple margin on the petals.

Melicytus venosus can be differentiated from *M. obovatus* by the taller more open up to 6 metres tall, with stems which have corky collars. The leaves are broadly elliptic and may have as many as 6 teeth. The flower petals also lack a purple margin.

DISTRIBUTION

Endemic. Te Waipounamu | **South Island**, almost exclusive to Tasman District, Mt Burnett south to Mt Owen, to Maungakura | Red Hill.

HABITAT

Near Coastal to Montane (20 - 950 m.a.s.l.). Prefers calcareous derived substrates, often seen growing on bluffs and overhangs, as well as cracks and fissures in rocks.

GENUS

Melicytus

FAMILY

Violaceae

AUTHORITY

Melicytus obovatus (Kirk) Garn.-Jones

SYNONYMS

Hymenanthera obovata Kirk

TAXONOMIC NOTES

Until the Heenan *et. al.* 2017 paper was published separating three new species from it, this species was thought to be quite variable. This variability was suggested to be either a result of having several growth forms, or being the result of plants being influenced by habitat and circumstance in which the specimens existed.

ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

FLOWERING

August - November

FRUITING

November - April

ETYMOLOGY

melicytus: From the Greek meli (honey) and kytos (hollow container), referring to the staminal nectaries of the flowers. Literally "honey-cave"

obovatus: From the Latin prefix ob- ('reverse') and the adjective ovatus 'egg-shaped'. Thus obovatus means 'reverse egg-shaped, i.e. the broadest part above the middle'.

NVS CODE

MELOBO

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

2n = 32

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | At Risk – Relict | Qualifiers: DP, RR, Sp, St

2012 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: RR, Sp

2009 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon

2004 | Range Restricted

[Jump to current conservation status](#)

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Allan HH. 1961. Flora of New Zealand, Volume I. Indigenous Tracheophyta: Psilopsida, Lycopsidea, Filicopsida, Gymnospermae, Dicotyledones. Government Printer, Wellington, NZ. 1085 p.

Heenan PB, Courtney SP, de Lange PJ & Molloy BPJ. 2017. Three new *Melicytus* species from central New Zealand and a revised circumscription of *Melicytus obovatus* (Violaceae), *New Zealand Journal of Botany*, 56(1), pp. 51-83. DOI:10.1080/0028825X.2017.1387156

ATTRIBUTION

Description prepared for NZPCN by M. Ward adapted from Allan (1961) & Heenan *et. al.* (2017).

Some of this factsheet information is derived from [Flora of New Zealand Online](#) and is used under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 New Zealand](#) licence.

MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/melicytus-obovatus/>

PDF DATE

25 May 2026