

Metrosideros excelsa

COMMON NAME

Pohutukawa

SYNONYMS

Metrosideros tomentosa Richard

FAMILY

Myrtaceae

AUTHORITY

Metrosideros excelsa Sol. ex Gaertn.

FLORA CATEGORY

Vascular – Native

ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

STRUCTURAL CLASS

Trees & Shrubs - Dicotyledons

NVS CODE

METEXC

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

2n = 22

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2018 | Threatened – Nationally Vulnerable

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2012 | Not Threatened

2009 | Not Threatened

2004 | Not Threatened

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Large sprawling mainly coastal tree with leathery oval leaves, bearing masses of red bristly flowers over Christmas. Naturally occurring north of Poverty Bay and north Taranaki, but can be now found as far south as Dunedin. Branches sprawling up to around 20 metres, often with masses of dangling reddish rootlets.

DISTRIBUTION

Endemic. New Zealand: Three Kings Islands and North Island from North Cape to about Pukearuhe, (northern Taranaki) in the west and near Mahia Peninsula (in the east). However, exact southern limit is difficult to ascertain as it has been widely planted and there is evidence that old time Maori cultivated the tree in some southerly areas. Found inland around the Rotorua Lakes and at Lake Taupo - though these occurrences could stem from Maori plantings (though the association of other normally coastal species around these lakes argues against this). Now widely planted throughout the rest of New Zealand (especially around Nelson, the Marlborough Sounds, the Kaikoura Coast and on the west coast to about Hokitika).



A Pohutukawa flower. Photographer: DoC



Pohutukawa flower. Photographer: DoC

HABITAT

Coastal forest and on occasion inland around lake margins. Also in the far north occasionally an associate of kauri forest. In some northerly locations it forms forest type in its own right - this forest is dominated by pohutukawa, other associates often include tawapou (*Pouteria costata*), kohekohe (*Dysoxylum spectabile*), puriri (*Vitex lucens*), karaka (*Corynocarpus laevigatus*), and on rodent-free offshore islands the frequent presence of coastal maire (*Nestegis apetala*), and milk tree (*Streblus banksii*) suggests these species too may once have been important in mainland examples of pohutukawa forest.

FEATURES

Tree up to 20 m tall with canopy spread of 10-50m. Specimens typically multi-trunked from base, trunks up to 2 m diameter, branches spreading, and often arching, sometimes looping over ground, and/or bearing "brooms" of aerial adventitious roots. Branchlets numerous, twiggy and long-persistent. Bark firm, persistent and difficult to detach, often deeply furrowed, grey to grey-brown, somewhat corky. Young branchlets tomentose, being covered in fine, deciduous, greyish-white hairs. Leaves of all but water shoots leathery, 25-120 × 25-60 mm, elliptic, oblong, rarely lanceolate, apex acute or obtuse, dark olive-green, undersides thickly clad in white tomentum, adaxial surface at first distinctly tomentose but hairs shedding with leaf maturation. Flowers borne on stout, tomentose pedicels crimson, orange, pink, yellow (or very rarely white). Hypanthium obconic, calyx lobes triangular (deltoid).

SIMILAR TAXA

In New Zealand it is most frequently confused with the Kermadec pohutukawa (*M. kermadecensis*) which is endemic to Raoul Island (Kermadec Island Group). This island endemic differs by the smaller, rounder leaves, and much smaller inflorescences. It also has a tendency to sporadically flower throughout the year and on the New Zealand mainland at least it has a more erect, shrubby growth form, and rarely (if ever) makes a big tree.

FLOWERING

(August-) November-December (-March)

FLOWER COLOURS

Red/Pink, Yellow

FRUITING

(January-) March-April (-May)

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE

Very easy from fresh seed. Seed must be sown fresh, even if left for a few weeks before sowing viability can drop, especially if seed is allowed to dry out. Very difficult from cuttings, though soft wood water shoots give the best results. Can be grafted onto seedlings.

THREATS

Like all New Zealand tree *Metrosideros*, pohutukawa is most at risk from possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) browse. These can seriously damage and even kill trees. Often where their browsing occurs within sites of unrestricted stock and vehicle access, pohutukawa forest is in danger of becoming locally extinct. It does remain common over large parts of its range, a situation being greatly improved by the efforts of people encouraged by the national coordination of Project Crimson - a non profit organisation set up to protect, enhance and/or establish pohutukawa forest, as well as promote the species use, and its conservation.

Myrtle Rust (*Austropuccinia psidii*) is an invasive fungus which threatens native myrtle species - learn more myrtlerust.org.nz

ETYMOLOGY

metrosideros: Iron heart

excelsa: Tall

WHERE TO BUY

Commonly sold by most retail nurseries.

VIDEO STORY

[Project Crimson in Kawhia](#) - TVNZ / DOC Meet the Locals Story.

ATTRIBUTION

Fact sheet prepared for NZPCN by: P.J. de Lange (4 January 2004). Description adapted from Allan (1961).

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Allan, H.H. 1961: Flora of New Zealand. Vol. I. Wellington, Government Printer.

CITATION

Please cite as: de Lange, P.J. (Year at time of access): *Metrosideros excelsa* Fact Sheet (content continuously updated). New Zealand Plant Conservation Network. <https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/metrosideros-excelsa/> (Date website was queried)

MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/metrosideros-excelsa/>