

Metrosideros robusta

COMMON NAME

Northern rata

SYNONYMS

Metrosideros florida Hook.f.

FAMILY

Myrtaceae

AUTHORITY

Metrosideros robusta A.Cunn.

FLORA CATEGORY

Vascular – Native

ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

STRUCTURAL CLASS

Dicotyledonous Trees & Shrubs

NVS CODE

METROB

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

Tall forest tree that sends roots down a host tree which is eventually strangled bearing pairs of oval leaves with a small dent at the tip and masses of red bristly flowers in summer. Twigs square in cross section and fuzzy when young. Leaves 2.5-5cm long by 1.5-2cm wide.

DISTRIBUTION

Endemic. New Zealand: Three Kings Islands, North Island (formerly widespread from Te Pahi south to Wellington, now scarce over large parts of this range, and apparently absent from the Hawkes Bay). South Island (abundant from Nelson west and south to Greymouth, from there locally common to about Hokitika, reaching a southern limit just south of Lake Mahinapua. In the east recently recorded from one site near Okiwi Bay, western Marlborough Sounds - though this site is unusual and may not be natural).

HABITAT

Coastal and Lowland forest occasionally extending to montane forest in some parts of the country. Once the co-dominant emergent tree of a distinctive vegetation type called rimu (*Dacrydium cupressinum*)/rata forest.



Rangitoto Island, new leaves. Photographer: John Barkla



A close up of Northern rata flowers. Photographer: John Braggins

FEATURES

Stout tree 25-40 m tall, often starting life as epiphyte, so basal trunk is hollow, and composed of interlocking roots. Trunk 2-3(-4) m diam. Bark firm, persistent, grey-brown, brown or rarely pale yellow, tessellated, shallowly furrowed, somewhat corky. Branchlets numerous, very twiggy (broom-like), puberulent with rust-brown hairs when young. Leaves (excl. water shoots) 25-50(-65) x (10-)15-25(-30) mm, leathery, dark-green, elliptic, ovate-oblong, to rhomboidal, apex obtuse, distinctly notched. Young growth pink, finely covered in rust-brown hairs, becoming glabrescent with age (hairs long persistent on midrib and leaf base). Water shoots - variable shape and size, glabrescent, pale green or yellow-green, delicate and wilting if detached from tree. Inflorescence a broad, terminal corymbiform, cymose, cluster of numerous flowers apically dominated by a temporarily dormant vegetative bud, which recommences growth following flowering. Pedicels 5-8 mm long. Hypanthia obconic, 9 mm long, sepals broad-triangular, petals shedding early, 2 x 3 mm, oblong, dark red, pink, orange or yellow, stamens numerous (25)-30-40 mm long, anthers versatile, pollen dark yellow to orange. Pistil similar length, stigma capitate. Ovary fused to hypanthium, ovules numerous. Capsules oblong 6-9 mm, distinctly raised above sepals and hypanthial rim. Seeds 2.5-5.5 mm, narrowly elliptic to linear, often twisted with apices usually curved or hooked.

SIMILAR TAXA

A distinctive species easily recognised by the small elliptic, ovate-oblong to rhomboidal dark green leaves, which possess a prominent apical notch. The young growth is often pink and is always finely covered in rust-coloured hairs. The hairs are slowly shed as the foliage matures but usually persists along the midrib and near the leaf base.

FLOWERING

(October-) November-January (-February)

FLOWER COLOURS

Orange, Red/Pink

FRUITING

(December-)-January (-March)

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

Northern rata is most at risk from possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) browse. Possums can seriously damage and kill trees, and have, in some situations been directly responsible for the regional loss of northern rata. The species remains common over large parts of range, a situation being improved by the efforts of people encouraged by the national coordination of Project Crimson. Another threat to northern rata comes from hybridization with pohutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsa*) which has now become established well south of its presumed natural southern limits. Ideally people should be discouraged from planting pohutukawa in places it is not natural to, especially when this borders habitats containing northern or southern rata (*Metrosideros umbellata*).

ETYMOLOGY

metrosideros: Iron heart

robusta: Sturdy

WHERE TO BUY

Sold by a number of mainline and specialist native plant nurseries. However, many plants sold as northern rata are hybrids between it and pohutukawa.

VIDEO STORY

[Project Crimson](#) - 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.

Beddie, A.D. 1953. Root behaviour in *Metrosideros*. Wellington Botanical Society Bulletin, 26: 2-6

Report on Northern rata dieback - Minginui faces by Gordon Hosking (DOC Conservation Advisory Science Notes, No. 66, 1994)

Sawyer, J.W.D., Mckessar, K. 2007. Northern rata (*Metrosideros robusta*): a species in decline? Wellington Botanical Society Bulletin, 50: 48-55

CITATION

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<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/metrosideros-robusta/> (Date website was queried)

MORE INFORMATION

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