

Rhopalostylis sapida

COMMON NAMES

nīkau

BIOSTATUS

Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2023 | Not Threatened

[Jump to previous conservation statuses](#)

CATEGORY

Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS

Trees & Shrubs - Monocotyledons

SIMPLIFIED DESCRIPTION

Palm to 15m tall with a ringed trunk and 3 m long erect leaves inhabiting lowland forest south to Okarito and Banks Peninsula and the Chatham Islands. Leaves with multiple narrow leaflets to 1 m long closely-spaced along central stem. Flowers pinkish, in multiple spikes at the top of trunk. Fruit red.

FLOWER COLOURS

Red/Pink

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Trunk up to 15 m, stout, covered in grey-green leaf scars, otherwise green. **Crownshaft** 0.6–(1) m long, dark green, smooth, bulging. **FronDS** up to 3 m long; leaflets to 1 m, closely set (sometimes overlapping), ascending. **Spathes** c. 300 × 150 mm, between pink and yellow, caducous. **Inflorescence** shortly stalked, with many branches, 200–400 mm long. **Flowers** sessile, unisexual, tightly packed, lilac to pink; males in pairs, caducous, stamens 6; females solitary, with minute staminodes, ovary 1-locular, stigmas terminal, recurved, persistent. **Fruit** c. 10 × 7 mm, elliptic-oblong, flesh red.

SIMILAR TAXA

Rhopalostylis baueri (Seem.) H.Wendl. et Drude, which differs mainly by its globose to oval fruits, and from most populations of *R. sapida*, by the broader leaflets. Both species of *Rhopalostylis* are very similar and research is needed.

DISTRIBUTION

Endemic. North Island, South Island from Marlborough Sounds and Nelson south to Okarito in the west and Banks Peninsula in the east. Also on Chatham and Pitt Islands. However Chatham Islands plants have a distinct juvenile form, larger fruits, and thicker indumentum on the fronds.

HABITAT

Primarily a species of coastal to lowland forest in the warmer parts of New Zealand.

GENUS

Rhopalostylis

FAMILY

Areaceae



Trunk of nikau. Photographer: Wayne Bennett, Licence: CC BY-NC.



Remutaka Forest Park. Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken: 16/07/2002, Licence: CC BY.

AUTHORITY

Rhopalostylis sapida H.Wendl. et Drude

SYNONYMS

None

TAXONOMIC NOTES

The palm on the Chatham Islands is probably distinct from *Rhopalostylis sapida* but further research is required.

ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

FLOWERING

November–April

FRUITING

February–November

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE

Easy from seed. Fruit should be soaked for a few days in water and then lightly scrubbed to clear the flesh, then place in sealed plastic bags in half shade until seed begins to germinate. Plant germinating seed in deep, narrow pots. Avoid disturbing the roots as much as possible. An excellent pot plant, and provided the tap root is left intact it can be easily transplanted. Quite hardy. Very variable in the wild, so could benefit from critical horticultural selection.

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING

FACU: Facultative Upland

Occasionally is a hydrophyte but usually occurs in uplands (non-wetlands).

CULTIVATION

Commonly sold by most retail plant nurseries.

PLANT OF THE MONTH

This plant has been featured as a Plant of the Month – see [Trilepidea: NZPCN newsletter for October 2007](#) for the full story.

ETYMOLOGY

rhopalostylis: Club style

sapida: Savoury

NVS CODE

RHOSAP

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

2n = 32

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

Esler AE. 1969. Leaf fall and flowering of nikau. *Wellington Botanical Society Bulletin* 36: 19–22.

Greenwood RM. 1969. Notes on growth of young nikau plants. *Wellington Botanical Society Bulletin* 36: 22–23.

ATTRIBUTION

Fact sheet prepared by P.J. de Lange for NZPCN (1 June 2013)

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MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/rhopalostylis-sapida/>

PDF DATE

25 May 2026