

Spinifex sericeus

COMMON NAMES

spinifex, kōwhangatara

BIOSTATUS

Native

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2023 | Not Threatened | Qualifiers: SO

[Jump to previous conservation statuses](#)

CATEGORY

Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS

Grasses

FLOWER COLOURS

White

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Stoloniferous, often forming colonies stretching to 80–(160) m along sand dunes, with much-branched, knotted, rope-like, hard, creeping culms.

Leaf-sheath leathery, strongly-nerved, silky-hairy. **Ligule** minute, ciliate, hairs very dense to 6 mm. **Leaf-blade** c. 300 mm, inrolled and c. 1.5 mm diameter, leathery, strongly nerved, silky-villous. **Culm** 2.5–6.0 mm diameter, internodes glabrous, silky-villous below inflorescence.

Dioecious*: **male inflorescence** with numerous pedunculate racemes, 0–120 mm, bearing up to 15 silky-villous spikelets, each terminated by a short bristle c. 10 mm; raceme clusters subtended by spathaceous bracts \leq raceme. **Male spikelets** 100 mm; glumes \leq spikelet, 7–9-nerved; lemmas similar to glumes but less villous, 5-nerved; each floret with 2 emarginate lodicules 0.6×0.3 mm, and 3 pollen-filled anthers to 6 mm.

Female inflorescence very conspicuous, globular, appearing spiny with strict bracts to 150 mm, disarticulating from culm at maturity and wheeling along sand; spikelets solitary, hidden at base of bract, 15–18 mm; glumes equal to spikelet, 5–7-nerved, silky-villous; lemmas shorter, less villous, rather chartaceous, 3–5-nerved; lower floret sterile; upper floret female, larger, with 2 lodicules c. 1×1 mm, and 3 stamens with stout filaments bearing white, pollen-less anthers up to 1.5 mm; ovary 1.5–2.0 mm, stigma-styles 17–20 mm; seed free, c. $4.5\text{--}5.0 \times 2.5$ mm.

* but stems with both male and female flowers are known

SIMILAR TAXA

None—the distinctive softly spiny female seed heads, which disarticulate and are usually seen rolling down the beach readily identify this species.

DISTRIBUTION

Indigenous. Common throughout New Zealand. Also present in Australia

HABITAT

Strictly coastal where it is confined to sandy beaches. This is the main dune forming indigenous plant in New Zealand. It is usually found at the front of actively accumulating foredunes. It does not tolerate stable dune systems and does not compete well with other introduced dune plants.

GENUS

Spinifex



Mt Maunganui. Photographer: Jesse Bythell, Date taken: 30/12/2011, Licence: CC BY-NC.



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FAMILY

Poaceae

AUTHORITY

Spinifex sericeus R.Br.

SYNONYMS

New Zealand plants have long been referred to *Spinifex hirsutus* Labill. a species that is now considered quite unrelated and confined to Western Australia

ENDEMIC TAXON

No

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

FLOWERING

September–December

FRUITING

November–May

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE

Easily grown from fresh seed (which is best). Can be grown from layered pieces but often slow to start and fickle. Does best when planted directly into sand dunes—not a good plant for the average garden.

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING

UPL: Obligate Upland

Rarely is a hydrophyte, almost always in uplands (non-wetlands).

CULTIVATION

Sold by a number of specialist native plant nurseries, such as [Coastlands Nursery](#). Popular plant for dune restoration.

MANAAKI WHENUA ONLINE INTERACTIVE KEY

[Key to the grasses of New Zealand](#)

NVS CODE

SPISER

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

2n = 18

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | Not Threatened | Qualifiers: SO

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

Edgar E, Connor HE. 2000. Flora of New Zealand. Vol. V. Grasses. Manaaki Whenua Press, Christchurch, NZ. 650 p.
Gardner R. 1999. *Spinifex sericeus* in Auckland. *Auckland Botanical Society Journal* 54: 36.

ATTRIBUTION

Fact sheet prepared for NZPCN by P.J. de Lange (June 2005). Description adapted from Edgar and Connor (2000). 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/spinifex-sericeus/>

PDF DATE

27 May 2026