

Urtica aspera

BIOSTATUS

Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

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

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CATEGORY

Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS

Herbs - Dicotyledons other than Composites

FLOWER COLOURS

Green, Yellow

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Stout, erect, suberect to trailing, tufted, some shaggy-looking, grey-green, pale green to yellow-green, dioecious herb up to 400 x 600 mm, woody at base, rhizomatous, widely spreading, often forming discrete clonal patches. All parts usually densely clad in shortly stalked, fine, stinging hairs (such that plants often appear to be fuzzed/shaggy due to sting density) sometimes markedly less so, otherwise sparsely hairy. Stipules 4 per node, up to 10 mm long, entire. Petioles 10-40(-60) mm long. Leaves 20-40(-60) x 10-40 mm, grey-green, green to yellow-green (very rarely dark green), broadly ovate, elliptic, rarely broadly lanceolate, subcordate, truncate to cuneate at base, obtusely to acutely serrated; teeth 5 mm, acute, sinus acute. Inflorescences axillary spikes up to 50 mm long, perianth-segements glabrate; staminate spikes usually widely-spaced, distant clusters, pistillate approximate. Perianth green, 4-partite, free at base, female flowers with perianths unequally divided, 2 largest enclosing achene, male flowers with 4 equal perianth segments, greenish-yellow. Achene 1-.5 mm, ellipsoid to ovoid, pale brown.

SIMILAR TAXA

Close to *U. incisa* Poiret from which it differs by its preference for usually montane to subalpine, dry situations, usually within a free draining substrate, and ovate to elliptic, serrated leaves, and usually copious covering of white, stalked stinging hairs, thus imparting a somewhat shaggy appearance to plants. Some plants that are much less sting covered superficially resemble *U. dioica* L. and these can best be separated by the basal stalk of the stinging hair being much less in length than the tip. Flora 4 states that *U. aspera* is not rhizomatous - this is incorrect as it is often widely rhizomatous a feature seen also in the introduced *U. dioica*.

DISTRIBUTION

Endemic. South Island, eastern from Marlborough (upper Awatere and Clarence) south to Central Otago.

HABITAT

Usually montane to subalpine (>300 m a.s.l.) in short tussock grassland, grey scrub, often in and around boulders, rock tors, at the base of cliffs, on rock ledges or at the back of shallow rock overhangs. Sometimes at low elevations in pasture or along river flats. This species seems to prefer dry sites to wet ones though it is very shade tolerant.



Urtica aspera, Hawkdun Range. Photographer: John Barkla, Licence: CC BY.



Morven Hills. Photographer: John Barkla, Licence: CC BY.

THREATS

An apparently naturally widely distributed and biologically sparse species. No immediate threats are obvious though it has been recorded hybridising with other indigenous *Urtica* species. It is unclear whether it has undergone any decline though it has not been recorded from the northern part of its range for a very long time - though it may have been overlooked or confused with introduced nettle species.

GENUS

Urtica

FAMILY

Urticaceae

AUTHORITY

Urtica aspera Petrie

SYNONYMS

None

ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

FLOWERING

October - January

FRUITING

November - May

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE

Easily grown from fresh seed, stem cuttings and rooted pieces. Does well in a dry, sunny, fertile, free draining soil. Not likely to be widely cultivated on account of its very painful sting.

ETYMOLOGY

urtica: From the Latin verb *urere* which means "to burn"

aspera: From the Latin *asper* 'rough', meaning rough or covered with hard short rigid points

NVS CODE

URTASP

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

$2n = 24$

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: Sp

2012 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: Sp

2009 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: DP

2004 | Sparse

[Jump to current conservation status](#)

REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES

Otago: 2025 | Regionally At Risk – Regionally Declining | Qualifiers: DPS, DPT, NR, NStr, PF, Sp, TL Help
The regional threat classification system leverages off the national assessments in the NZTCS, providing information relevant for the regional context. Otago conservation status information is sourced from the "[Conservation Status of Indigenous Vascular Plants in Otago, 2025](#)" Jarvie S et al. (2025) report.

ATTRIBUTION

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

NZPCN FACT SHEET CITATION

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MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/urtica-aspera/>

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