

Urtica ferox

COMMON NAMES

ongaonga, tree nettle

BIOSTATUS

Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2023 | Not Threatened

[Jump to previous conservation statuses](#)

CATEGORY

Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS

Trees & Shrubs - Dicotyledons

SIMPLIFIED DESCRIPTION

Jagged-leaved, stinging, large shrub to 3 m tall, sometimes forming extensive thickets, bearing pairs of thin sharply toothed pointed leaves on long stems. Young parts covered in white needles that inject a painful toxin. Flowers and fruit tiny, in short spikes at base of leaves.

FLOWER COLOURS

Green

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The shrub stands up to 2 m tall with a base up to 12 cm diameter. Its leaves are pale green, 8-12 x 3-5 cm that are borne on petioles up to 5 cm long.

SIMILAR TAXA

None, although other indigenous *Urtica* species may be confused with *U. ferox* when it is a juvenile.

DISTRIBUTION

Endemic. Found throughout NZ in North and South Islands reaching Otago as its southern limit.

HABITAT

Common in the fringes of bushland. Mainly found in coastal and lowland forest margins and shrublands.

GENUS

Urtica

FAMILY

Urticaceae

AUTHORITY

Urtica ferox G.Forst.

ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No



Close up taken on Otago Peninsula.
Photographer: John Barkla, Licence: CC BY.



Stinging hairs on leaf. Western Hutt hills.
Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken:
10/08/2013, Licence: CC BY.

FLOWERING

November - March

FRUITING

December - May

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING

FACU: Facultative Upland

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

POISONOUS PLANT

The tree nettle is one of New Zealand's most poisonous native plants. Standing about two metres tall, its coarsely toothed leaves have numerous white stinging hairs (trichomes), up to 6 mm long, at the tip of each tooth as well as on young stalks and leaf veins. These are hollow cylinders with tapered points, which break after piercing the skin, injecting toxins into the tissues, giving rise to pain and a rash. There have been cases of dogs and horses developing neurological problems, with respiratory distress and convulsions within minutes of exposure, often dying within hours, although some do recover. There are also reports of human poisoning in botanical references or the press. Connor, in his book, 'The Poisonous Plants in New Zealand', mentions a group of trampers who developed loss of coordination for three days after being stung. In another instance, a typist developed tingling numbness in the hand after grasping a nettle bush, preventing her from typing for five days. There are also reports of severe headaches, blurred vision and extreme fatigue. A fatal poisoning was described in 1961, when a young man died of paralysis and respiratory problems several hours after walking through a patch of tree nettles. Click on this link for more information about [Poisonous native plants](#).

Detailed article on neurotoxin effects by Dr Graeme Hammond-Tooke, FRACP. Department of Medical and Surgical Sciences, University of Otago, Dunedin in [Trilepidea Issue 30](#) (May 2006).

ETYMOLOGY

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

ferox: From the Latin ferox 'fierce', usually referring to very spiny plants

NVS CODE

URTFER

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

2n = 48

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | Not Threatened

2012 | Not Threatened

2009 | Not Threatened

2004 | Not Threatened

[Jump to current conservation status](#)

REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES

Otago: 2025 | Regionally Not Threatened 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-ferox/>

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