Urtica sykesii

COMMON NAMES
native nettle, bush nettle

BIOSTATUS
Native

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS
2023 | Not Threatened | Qualifiers: SO
Jump to previous conservation statuses

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Herbs - Dicotyledons other than Composites

SIMPLIFIED DESCRIPTION
Delicate, usually much-branched herb covered in prominent stinging hairs. Leaves green, deeply incised, triangular-ovate with subcordate leaf bases. Plants bearing both male and female flowers.

Lake Waikaremoana. Photographer: John Sawyer, Licence: CC BY-NC.

FLOWER COLOURS
Green, Yellow

Greenstone Valley. Photographer: John Barkla, Date taken: 01/03/2013, Licence: CC BY.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Erect, perennial, rhizomatous herb 0.15–0.60 m with elongating rhizomes, aerial stems usually unbranched. Stem indumentum of very few stinging hairs with pluricellular base c. 0.2–0.5 mm overall and erect setae 1.3–2.2 mm long and very few simple trichomes 0.2–0.3 mm long. Leaf lamina 20–60 × 20–50 mm triangular to triangular-ovate; surface very sparsely pubescent with short simple trichomes 0.2–0.5 mm long and very few stinging hairs (abaxially only on the veins), adaxially with punctiform cystoliths; leaf base truncate to subcordate; margins regularly dentate with 9–10(–12) teeth on each side; leaf apex acute to acuminate; lamina light greenish; stipules free (4 per node) 2–10 mm long; petioles 30–70 mm long. Plants monoecious; lowest inflorescences pure male, upper ones pure female. Staminate flowers with tepals c. 1.2–1.8 mm long. Pistillate flowers with short tepals 0.5–0.7 mm long and long tepals 0.9–1.1 mm long, sparsely pubescent, esetulose. Inflorescence 10–20 mm. Mature fruit with longer tepals 1.3–1.5 mm long, achenes subcircular in outline, rounded at base and at the tip, laterally flattened, c. 1.2–1.5 × 0.8–1 mm.

SIMILAR TAXA
Distinguished from other New Zealand Urtica by the triangular-ovate leaves with subcordate bases, which are 20–60 mm long; usually moderately to densely setose (hairy) on the stems and leaves; and by the monoecious flowers, with male flowers arranged below the female flowers

DISTRIBUTION
Indigenous. Australia and New Zealand. In New Zealand widespread in the North and South Islands though scarce north of Auckland. Seemingly confined to Victoria in Eastern Australia.

GENUS
Urtica

FAMILY
Urticaceae

AUTHORITY
Urtica sykesii Grosse-Veldmann et Weigend

SYNONYMS
Previously confused with Urtica incisa Poir. See under ‘Taxonomic Notes’ below

TAXONOMIC NOTES
Urtica sykesii is the species previously treated (incorrectly it transpires see Grosse-Veldmann et al. 2016) by New Zealand botanists as *Urtica incisa* Poir., an Australian species that is sparingly naturalised in New Zealand (where it had previously, incorrectly, been treated as *U. dioica* subsp. *gracilis* (Webb et al. 1988)).

ENDEMIC TAXON
No

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
Throughout the year

FRUITING
Throughout the year

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE
Easily grown from rooted pieced, stem cuttings and fresh seed. Flourishes in a shady, moist soil. Inclined to be short-lived. The impact of the stinging hairs seems to vary from plant to plant and in the way people react to them. Generally this species has a less painful sting than our other indigenous Urtica

ETYMOLOGY
urtica: From the Latin verb urere which means “to burn”
sykesii: Named after William Russell Sykes (1927-2018) an English born botanist who emigrated to New Zealand in the late 1960s and worked for the DSIR Botany Division and DSIR Land Resources. Sykes specialised in the taxonomy of cultivated plants, naturalised plants and made studies of the South Pacific Islands, especially the Kermadec and Cook Island groups.

NVS CODE
URTSYK

CHROMOSOME NUMBER
2n = 24

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 Threatened – Regionally Endangered | Qualifiers: DPS, DPT, PF, RR 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.
Otago: 2025 | Regionally Not Threatened | Qualifiers: 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.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Grosse-Veldmann, B.; Conn, B.J.; Weigend, M. 2016: Weeding the nettles IV: A redefinition of *Urtica incisa* and allies in New Zealand and Australia, including the segregation of two new species *Urtica sykesii* and *U. perconfusa*. Phytotaxa 245(4): 251-261.
Webb CJ, Sykes WR, Garnock-Jones PJ 1988. Flora of New Zealand. Vol. IV. Botany Division, DSIR, Christchurch.

ATTRIBUTION

Fact Sheet prepared by P.J. de Lange (14 February 2016). Description based on Grosse-Veldmann et al. (2016).

MORE INFORMATION

https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/urtica-sykesii/

PDF DATE

08 June 2026