March 1999

Northern Rata
Metrosideros robusta

The Northern rata tree can grow up to 30 metres tall with a massive trunk of up to 2 metres or more in diameter. If established as an epiphyte, the trunk is not a true stem but is comprised of a number of fused roots. The epiphyte sends down roots which grow a supporting trunk around the host tree.

Below: The indented tips of the leaves, a characteristic feature of northern rata.
Photo: John E. Braggins.

The leaves are small and leathery in texture with indented tips unlike Southern rata. The wood is reddish brown with a twisted grain due to the nature of its growth. The flowers are a mass of dark scarlet stamens borne in sprays on the tips of branches.

Flowering and fruiting

Flowers: November - January
Fruits: December - January

Similar species

Metrosideros umbellata (southern rata)
Metrosideros excelsa (pohutukawa)

Habitat

Northern rata is found in coastal to lower montane forest. It grows either as an epiphyte, (in the canopy of a suitable host tree), or on the ground. The plant requires plenty of light and will not become established if conditions are too dry for epiphytes.

Associated plants

The foster tree of epiphytic rata is usually rimu. Rata is usually found in hardwood, podocarp and beech forests. It is associated with such species as rewarewa, tawa, hinau, kanuka, kahikatea, kamahi, kohekohe, pukatea and mahoe.

Left: Northern rata typically has wide spreading branches with billowy layers of foliage. Photo: Lisette Collins.

Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

Distribution

Northern rata is abundant in forests from North Cape southwards to Marlborough, Nelson and Westland. Within the Wellington region it is predominantly found in the Tararua and Rimutaka Ranges and also in the Mt Bruce Forest. Northern rata thrives in the regenerated forest of Kapiti island due to the absence of predators.

Traditional/ cultural use

The inner bark can be steeped in hot water and the liquid rubbed into rheumatic joints. It has also been used to cure ringworm in children by rubbing the infusion into their scalps.

Propagation and Cultivation

Rata are easily grown, requiring little or no aftercare.
If you intend to propagate rata from seed, you should use only seed that has been gathered from trees occurring naturally in the area. The small wind-dispersed seeds are shed from April to June, and these should be collected from trees that have flowered earlier in the year.
Several nurseries stock northern rata which has been propagated from seed collected in the southern North Island. They include:

- Terra Firma Ltd, Taupo Native Plant Nursery, 155 Centennial Drive, PO Box 437, TAUPO. Tel (07) 378 5450.
  Seedlings propagated from Wainuiomata, Manawatu, Tararua Ranges
- Plantwise Nursery, 1 Summit Rd, LOWER HUTT. Tel (04) 567 1732.
  Seedlings propagated mostly from Tararua Ranges.
- Wairarapa Nature Nursery, Norfolk Rd, RD1, CARTERTON. Tel (06) 378 8969.
  Seedlings propagated from Tararua Ranges.

To propagate, scatter seeds on trays ensuring they are visible, and keep in the shade. They can take up to 20 days to germinate and have been found to grow well from September onwards, although Autumn is also suitable. Growing rata from seed is preferable to cuttings, because it is easier and it ensures that genetic variation is maintained.
Transplanting should be undertaken in Autumn or Winter, after plants have reached approximately 50cm tall. Seedlings should be planted in the ground in well lit areas, or as epiphytes in baskets in established trees, with well draining scoria.

Threats

The greatest threat to northern rata is from possums which eat the leaves, buds, flowers and young shoots of the tree. Possums can kill a mature rata within two years, and in some areas they have contributed to the dieback of extensive areas of rata. Other threats include cutting for firewood, hybridisation with pohutukawa, forest clearance for road and building construction, and natural disturbances.

Possums can kill a mature rata tree within two years.
Photo: Phil Knightsbridge.

*This fact sheet was compiled from information in McKessar, K. and Sawyer, J. 1999: Northern rata (*Metrosideros robusta*) in Wellington Conservancy. It was published with funding from Project Crimson, sponsored by Carter Holt Harvey Ltd.*