

# Phormium tenax

## COMMON NAMES

flax, harakeke, kōrari (Māori name for inflorescence)

## BIOSTATUS

Native – Endemic taxon

## CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2023 | Not Threatened | Qualifiers: SO

[Jump to previous conservation statuses](#)

## CATEGORY

Vascular

## STRUCTURAL CLASS

Herbs - Monocots

## FLOWER COLOURS

Red/Pink, Yellow

## DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Stout liliaceous herb, 1-5(-6) m tall. Leaves numerous, arising from fan-like bases. Individual leaves rather stiff at first, but becoming decurved, somewhat pendulous or “floppy” in upper half to a third, 1-3 x 50-120 mm, usually blue-grey (glaucous) or dark green, lamina margin, entire, somewhat thickened and pigmented black, dark red, pink, yellow or cream. Inflorescence 5(-6) m tall, somewhat woody and fleshy when fresh, long persistent, drying charcoal grey or black, with the fibrous interior becoming progressively more exposed. Peduncle 20-30 mm diam., erect, dark grey-green or red-green, glabrous. Flowers 25-50 mm long, tubular, predominantly dull red but may also be pink or yellow; tips of inner tepals slightly recurved. Ovary erect. Capsules 50-100 mm long, dark green, red-green or black, trigonous in cross-section, erect, abruptly contract at tip, not twisted, initially fleshy becoming woody with age, long persistent. Seeds 9-10 x 4-5 mm, black, elliptic, flat and plate-like, margins frilled or twisted.

## SIMILAR TAXA

Could only be confused with the so called mountain flax (*Phormium cookianum*) from which it is easily distinguished by the erect rather than pendulous seed pods

## DISTRIBUTION

Indigenous to New Zealand and Norfolk Island. A broad circumscription has been adopted here - many botanists feel that plants from the Chatham Islands could be distinguished at species rank from the mainland New Zealand species, other distinctive variants occur on the Three Kings and outer Hauraki Gulf Islands, and along the Kaikoura coast. Norfolk Island plants though uniform differ in subtle ways from the New Zealand forms of *P. tenax*. Further study into this variation is underway.

## HABITAT

Common from lowland and coastal areas to montane forest, usually but not exclusively, in wetlands and in open ground along riversides.

## THREATS

Not threatened although see the discussion below about flax dieback. This die back phenomenon is characterised by abnormal yellowing of the leaves and may result in collapse of flax plants or whole populations.

## DETAILED TAXONOMY



Flax. Photographer: John Sawyer, Licence: CC BY-NC.



Phormium tenax. Photographer: John Sawyer, Licence: CC BY-NC.

## GENUS

Phormium

## FAMILY

Asphodelaceae

## AUTHORITY

Phormium tenax J.R.Forst. et G.Forst.

## SYNONYMS

None

## ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

## ENDEMIC GENUS

No

## ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

## ECOLOGY

## FLOWERING

(September-) October-November (-January)

## FRUITING

(November-) December (-March)

## PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE

Very easy from fresh seed. Most commonly grown by the division of rooted fans from established plants.

## WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING

FACW: Facultative Wetland

Usually is a hydrophyte but occasionally found in uplands (non-wetlands).

## OTHER INFORMATION

## CULTIVATION

Very commonly cultivated throughout New Zealand and in many parts of the world. However, most cultivated material available is a mixture of hybrid, variegated and/or colour mutations. The actual wild forms of the species are now rarely available in mainline garden centres and nurseries.

## CULTURAL USE/IMPORTANCE

Harakeke is an important plant used in weaving. For more information go to the Manaaki Whenua-Landcare Research website <https://rauopiwhakaoranga.landcareresearch.co.nz/>. A report funded by the Sustainable Farming Fund identified numerous uses for flax to increase its abundance in the landscape including buffering or establishing corridors. For more information read "Integrating New Zealand Flax into Land Management Systems" by Elizabeth McGruddy (2006).

## FLAX DIEBACK NOTE

'Yellow-leaf' is one of the most serious diseases of harakeke (similar to the 'sudden decline' in cabbage trees). The disease is characterised by abnormal yellowing of the leaves. Scheele (1997) described how "growth of young leaves may be stunted and eventually the whole plant may collapse. Underground, the roots die off, the rhizome tissues collapse and rot spreads towards the crown of the plant".

The cause has been identified as being a phytoplasma (a bacterium), transmitted by the native flax plant hopper. The hopper injects the bacterium into the leaf, while sucking the sap. Yellow-leaf is found in North and South Island, but is more prevalent in North Island (Boyce et al, 1951). For more information read "Integrating New Zealand Flax into Land Management Systems" by Elizabeth McGruddy (2006).

## ETYMOLOGY

**phormium:** Basket or basketwork

**tenax:** Tough

## NVS CODE

PHOTEN

## CHROMOSOME NUMBER

2n = 32

## 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.

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.

## REFERENCING AND CITATIONS

### REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Boyce, et al. 1951. Preliminary note on yellowleaf disease. NZJ of Science and Technology, 32(3): 76-77

Scheele, S. 1997. Insect pests and diseases of harakeke, Manaaki Whenua Press

### 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/phormium-tenax/>

### PDF DATE

23 April 2026