

Christmas in crimson

Story by Diana Anthony
Photo by Rod Morris

THE 'New Zealand Christmas Tree', 'jewel of the North', are evocative names used to describe our revered native tree the pohutukawa, *Metrosideros excelsa*. For many centuries it washed the golden coastlines of Northland with crimson, a blossoming described by the Maori as a 'ring of fire'.

From Cape Reinga in the far north down to Poverty Bay and Taranaki, the blossoming of the tree has since European settlement always been synonymous with Christmas and the holidays. The rapid approach of the latter sent me into the Whangarei branch of DoC for an update on Project Crimson, the trust established in 1990 to preserve and replant the rapidly declining pohutukawa.

The much-loved tree which has almost become a national symbol has always been ingrained in New Zealand history and holds a prominent place in Maori culture.

Te Ranga at the northern cape is the departing place for spirits of the dead on their journey to Hawaiki. Only the remnants remain of the great tree which once stood there, but it is said that the branches leaning down into the surf form the bridge between life and the portals of death. Its blossoms are called 'Te pupa o te Reinga' - the flowers of the spirits' flight.

The Tainui canoe was always tethered to a giant pohutukawa tree and the great age attained by the trees symbolised wisdom and spiritual strength. To the Maori the pohutukawa is a chiefly tree or a rakau rangatira. Single specimens or coastal groves often identify burial grounds or battle sites, or mark the birth of a Maori chief's son. The ancient trees have always been a favourite with New Zealand poets. Eileen Duggan wrote with uncanny foresight in her *New Zealand Poems* published in 1940:

... Save these red trees that put forth such a blaze,
The very Tasman could not put it out
When summer strikes the tinder of their brows.

In her poem *Through a Sudden Gate* Muriel Parker wrote:

... A huge gnarled pohutukawa
Bent with age and yet so beautiful
Lit with the jubilation of a Christmas tree,
Hangs her deep red branches
Like honey-sweet wine
Over the warm flashing blue of the summer sea.

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The tree has leaves toughened against sun and wind. It can endure the most inhospitable and exposed conditions, salt spray and gales, its roots clinging perilously to rock-faced cliffs, sheltering them and colonising.

Sometimes found to be as old as 600 years, it has always been a primary element in the coastal ecosystems. Historically, during its spectacular flowering period the tree's biodiversity was immense. The native bat, pekapeka, roosted in its branches feeding on the sweet nectar of its flowers. This also attracted tui, kaka, bellbirds and sometimes the rare stitchbird. Insect eaters like the saddleback nested in holes in the trunk and fed their young on pohutukawa weevil borers and other insects from the tree. Geckos and spiders spread the pollen from flower to flower and men made honey from the nectar. On Great

Barrier Island the ancient giant weta still lives in the tree's rough bark and climbs into its arms to feed at night.

After the flowers had faded, small birds fed on the seed and obligingly distributed it to other areas. Herons and shags rested in its branches; shrubs, lilies, grasses and ferns flourished in the shallow soil over its roots or rooted along its arms. The mighty trees gave home, shelter and food to all these species and visual pleasure to all New Zealanders.

THEN suddenly in the 1980s it was observed that thousands of pohutukawa were dying before our eyes. Only a few offshore islands like the Poor Knights and Rangitoto and a very few parts of the coastal mainland had any more than scattered individual trees.

The rich, dark green and crimson canopy began to disappear, to be replaced by gaunt skeletons which were gradually smashed to the ground by the very winds against which the trees once sheltered the land.

The giants withstood the elements and bleak inhospitable conditions but they could not withstand razing by fire and clear felling by man as farmland was cleared. Nor could they withstand concentrated attack by possums and goats. Regenerative seedlings were strangled by kikuyu and weeds, and destroyed by grazing stock.

It was awareness of the plight of the pohutukawa that led Gerry Brackenbury of the Department of Conservation's Northland office and staff of New Zealand Forest Products, now Carter Holt Harvey, to form the Project Crimson Trust in 1990 for the restoration, preservation and replanting of the tree.

The project when launched, like the flowers of the tree, set public imagination ablaze and generous financial sponsorship was given by Westpac bank, Villa Maria Wine Company and other business enterprises. Local councils, community groups, schools and colleges, forest and bird protection societies and private individuals gave unstintingly of their time and labour to help raise funds by working hand in hand with DoC for Project Crimson.

LEFT: On some islands in the far north the ancient giant weta lives in the bark of pohutukawa, coming out at night to feed. Rod Morris photographed this one on the flowers of a pohutukawa growing on the Poor Knights Islands.

APHID CONTROL THE ORGANIC WAY

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I was delighted to be told by Gerry, who is now Education Officer and Project co-ordinator for DoC, Northland, that four years on, in 1994, the prognosis for the restoration of the tree is looking extremely good.

In Whangarei the District Council has initiated its own 'Project Crimson', working in conjunction with Marsden Point Oil Refinery to replant Northland's coastlines.

Bay of Islands 'Crimson Trail' groups have planted pohutukawa at 100 metre intervals along a 50 kilometre stretch extending from Kaikohe to Paiaha through Mainate North and from Opua to Kawakawa along the North's major tourist routes.

The volunteer groups devote many hours to collecting the tree's seed, germinating it then potting the saplings on until they are of a size to be planted out. Last year close to 30,000 seedlings were cared for by individuals and community groups all over the North Island.

In the 1993/4 year, Project Crimson Trust was able to provide more than \$22,000 in funding, trees and potting materials to support replanting projects from the far North to Taranaki.

Seedlings from all over the country are sent to Paromemore prison in Auckland where the horticultural expertise of some of the residents is being harnessed for Project Crimson.

The seeds are germinated, potted on and the small trees are finally sent back to replant the area from which the seeds were taken. Gerry stressed DoC's strict policy of preserving genetic integrity by replanting areas with seed from the original species which colonised them.

While they are greatly valued in the wild, pohutukawa have now become popular with home gardeners and local councils. However, finding the 'perfect' garden specimen in terms of flowers, foliage, shape and size carries with it an inherent danger. For in so doing we run the risk of destroying the genetic characteristics associated with different regions where pohutukawa grow.

For example, a millennia of geological and climatic changes have given Northland trees a different genetic base from pohutukawa in other regions. Depending on its place of origin, every pohutukawa has adapted itself to particular conditions and will also support a local fauna.

It is very important therefore that we do not 'help' by replanting coastline areas, for example, with more exotic species of the tree suited to the home garden situation. Well-meaning community groups have replanted exposed areas with tender hybridised varieties which have failed, a sad waste of community effort and finance.

Trees more suited to the sheltered aspects of gardens and parks might include *M. kermadecensis*, the pohutukawa from the Kermadec Islands, which is a smaller variety and also comes in a variegated form.

M. Maunapoko with vibrant red flowers was discovered on Great Barrier Island by Graeme Platt and is recommended for planting beach sections.

'Vibrance' has bright scarlet flowers with an orange glow bearing exceptionally long handsome stamens. It forms a medium sized tree and will even do well in large tubs.

There are many more excellent hybridised varieties suitable for the home garden, but it is important that we do not plant them too near original existing trees in the wild with which they will hybridise, thus destroying the unique characteristics of both.

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1. Entry is by the official New Zealand Gardener entry form only. 2. You may submit more than one photo per entry. 3. Photographs become the property of Yates NZ Ltd, with the right to publish them at any time in the future. 4. Closing date for entries is 10 February 1995. 5. The Judges' decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. 6. Prizes are not exchangeable.

DOC raise pohutukawa to their nurseries and local branches are happy to advise and sometimes supply members of the public with seed or trees which are endemic to their specific area and ecological conditions.

Problems do sometimes arise in the endeavour to maintain this genetic purity.

The Japanese Nissho sawmills in the far North offered funding to replant coastline areas. When DoC officials went to inspect the proposed sites, there were only a few trees left and they had not flowered, so desperate was their condition. Fortunately pohutukawa take easily from cuttings - these were taken so that the area may be slowly recolonised and the original species perpetuated.

Other problems include destruction of the young trees by pests and noxious weeds, vandalism, toxic spray drift, lack of care after planting and illegal felling.

Coastal planting projects on more inhospitable areas still

sometimes fail because of adverse climatic conditions and because the 1080 drops used to control possum numbers in mainland forests do not extend over the coastline. Project Crimson was able to donate \$2000 to coastal areas recommended for them.

The rich, dark green and crimson canopy began to disappear, to be replaced by gaunt skeletons which were gradually smashed to the ground by the very winds against which the trees once sheltered the land.

As this year for possum control, and Alcan, the producers of aluminium foil, have donated materials to protect trees by banding.

What can we do as members of the public to make sure the pohutukawa, which has been called one of the world's most beautiful trees, bloom again? As gardeners we can plant the smaller species

home garden situation. It is important to remember when planting pohutukawa that they are not extending over the coastline. Project Crimson was able to dig a nice big hole for them

Yates

Hanging Basket Photo Competition

Hardy Tips for taking a good photograph of a hanging basket.

- Be aware of background objects which may distract from the main subject.
- Avoid taking the photo against a bright background.
- A cloudy or dull day is ideal for taking photos - no harsh shadows.
- When using a flash watch out for reflections.
- We recommend you include only 1 hanging basket per photo.
- Include the whole basket in the photo but don't get too close as the shot may blur.
- Good luck and happy shooting.

In rural areas we can make positive contribution by replanting pohutukawa species recommended by DoC. We can as farmers desist from felling trees that still exist, work hard to reduce possum numbers in our area, control noxious weeds and make sure stock are fenced out of regenerative areas of bush.

If you are fortunate enough to have pohutukawa on your land the seed may be collected in dry weather conditions by holding a paper bag over a cluster of seed capsules and giving it a good shake. The seeds lose their viability quickly - where absolutely necessary store them in the refrigerator (not the freezer).

For propagation, prepare seed trays full of sterilised seed mix, or leaf mould and loam. Sow the seed thinly and cover with the lightest layer of fine river sand. Cover the trays with plastic or glass and sheets of newspaper to minimise light.

Germmination should take about seven days; remove the coverings and mist seedlings with a fine spray. Do not over-water. Keep the seedlings in a sheltered spot until they are about one centimetre high with four to six leaves. Pick them out into separate containers and repot until the trees are ready for planting out at about two years of age.

Here in Whangarei we are fortunate enough to have a town basin lined by a magnificent avenue of *M. excelis* which welcomes incoming yachts by making a carpet of crimson along the footpaths to herald Christmas.

We can all help Project Crimson, each in our own way to ensure that the tree which gives us the ring of fire fringed with gold will remain a sight which any New Zealander or tourist visiting the North Island may enjoy and which future generations may treasure.

Merry Christmas!

I should like to thank Gerry Brackenbury, Education Officer, DoC, Northland, for his kind assistance in helping me collate information for this article.