

The New Zealand
Christmas tree.

Scarlet Ribbons

A spectacular floral
display wrapped
around our coasts to
herald the arrival
of a Southern
Hemisphere Christmas.

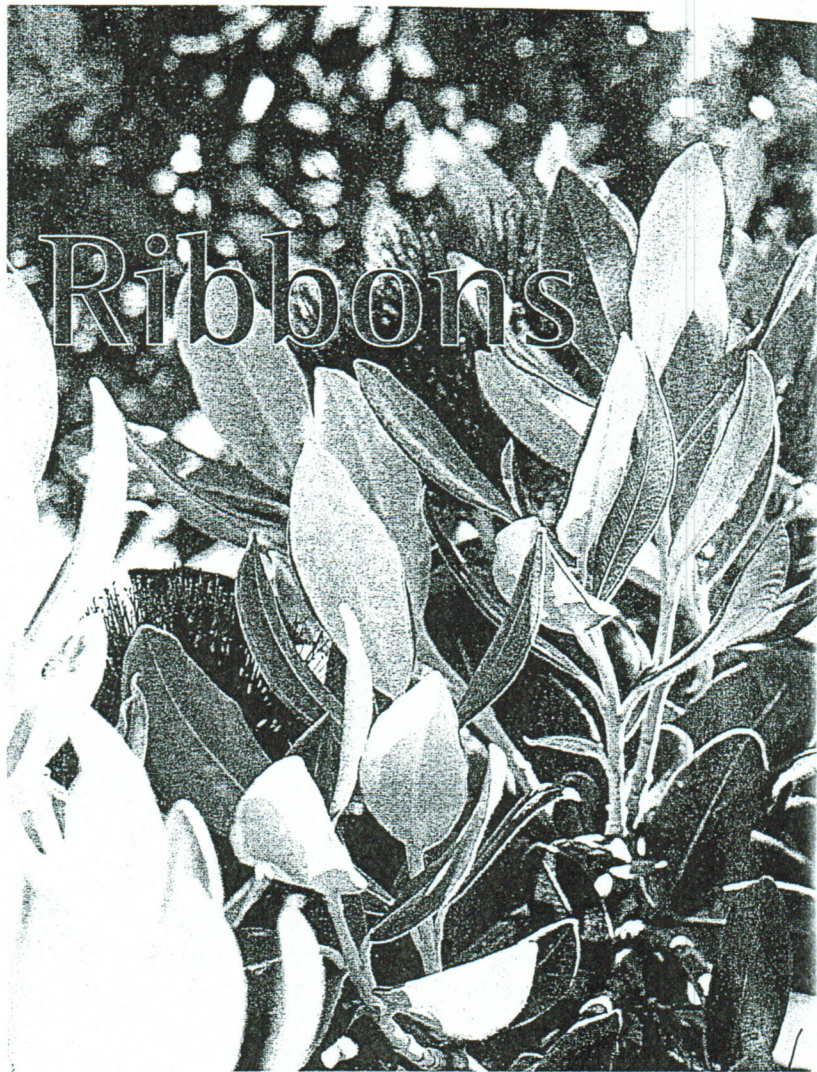
story
Andrew Crowe

There's something awkward about celebrating Christmas in New Zealand. Those uncomfortably hot Santas in supermarkets, the exchange of snow-scene greeting cards, the evergreen Christmas trees symbolising survival through the lean months of winter — our rituals are so obviously out of place.

Most of these rites have nothing to do with Christ of course but are rather pagan traditions associated with the ancient Roman sun festival: *Natalis solis invicti* (the birthday of the unconquered sun).

As kiwi families head to the beach for their summer picnic these northern hemisphere customs obscure the evident change of season and a truer relationship with the rest of the natural world around us.

It is rare that you hear pohutukawa called by any other name, except perhaps when sitting in a tour bus with one of those helpful drivers who point out the unique delights of the country to visitors from overseas. "This is the New Zealand Christmas Tree," they announce, "for it has a spectacular show of red flowers that appear for a few weeks around that time of year." For northern New Zealanders at least the fiery scarlet floral display of this coastal tree is undoubtedly a marker of the festive season.



Photographs © Andrew Crowe

As one might expect, early Maori similarly used the flowering and fruiting times of such trees (along with the arrival and departure times of migratory birds and the appearance of certain morning stars) to signal the months of their calendar.

But they had plenty of other uses for pohutukawa too. They used its timber for making mauls, weapons, paddles and various agricultural tools, such as fern root beaters, spade

USES

Pohutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsa*)

HOW TO IDENTIFY

Of course, the most commonly noticed feature of the tree is its crimson flowers, arranged in fluffy fist-sized balls. The trunk is gnarled and spreading.

Leaves (5-8 cm long) are velvety-white beneath (unlike the very similar-looking, and closely related, rata). Look out too for pohutukawa's white branchlets.

Leaves grow opposite one another, in pairs (unlike another common coastal tree, karo).

1000 of pohutukawa




blades, weeders and digging sticks. And in times of sickness, an infusion of its inner bark was used to cure dysentery and diarrhoea — a use which is not surprising since pohutukawa contains ellagic acid, an astringent effective in the treatment of both ailments.

Maori also collected the nectar from the flowers, both as a food and for treating sore throats. This was said to have been sucked out through a reed (though it is hard to think of a hollow native reed that would be suitable). You can just poke your tongue into the flower instead, as the tui and bellbird do.

When the Pakeha came, they too found the deep red timber to be extremely strong and durable and used it for making stems and knees in boatbuilding. It is so dense and hard-wearing that it was used in bearings and machine beds, framing and sills of dock gates and the like. And, although it seems a bit sacrilegious to mention these days, it makes good firewood too.

Pohutukawa grows naturally only north of a line about New Plymouth to Wairoa, but it is widely planted (mostly as a coastal tree) as far south as Dunedin.

The  pohutukawa's vivid scarlet flowers are the first sign that Christmas is coming. It's said that if they flower early, Christmas Day will be fine and clear.

The tree is most often noticed on coastal cliffs, but is occasionally found some distance inland too. It appears to grow almost without soil, its roots wrapped instead around rocks or finding their way into cracks in vertical cliffs, often so close to the sea that the roots and lower branches are regularly soaked with salt water.

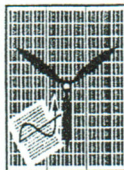
To cope with the salt spray, the leaves have a waxy, waterproof coating on the top surface and are often curled under at the edges to let the salty water run off. The lower surface is covered with a dense mat of fine hairs that help slow evaporation of the tree's precious moisture and protect its tiny breathing holes (stomata) from getting clogged with salt.

As these leaves age and fall, they turn attractive deep yellows and reds. And as the tree's brief flowering comes to an end, the ground beneath them is covered in a bright red carpet of fallen stamens (the conspicuous thread-like part of the flower). Finely divided aerial roots hang like reddish twig brooms from the trunk (sometimes also from the branches) but, unless the tree is practically sprawling on a cliff, these often never reach the ground.

A great specimen tree, pohutukawa can also be used for hedging and shelter. It grows easily from fresh seed (collected in February or March) but semi-hardwood cuttings have the advantage of by-passing the tender juvenile stage and flowering much sooner. To collect the tiny, dust-like seed, hold a bag over a cluster of the seed capsules and shake. Sow the seed thinly and keep them constantly damp until they germinate.

As the trees grow, it will often be necessary to protect the young shoots from possums, which are currently a very serious threat to the tree's survival in the wild.

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