

Wellington's pohutukawas

by Donal Dutchie

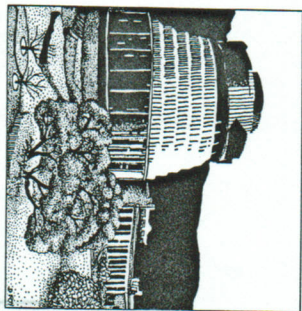
I hadn't realised there were so many pohutukawa varieties available until I read Jack Hobbs' excellent article, *Pohutukawa, Jewel of the North*, in the December 1992 issue.

As Jack explained, pohutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsa*) is a great feature in the northern coastal regions of the North Island. However, it is also very prominent in Wellington and the western coastal areas of the lower North Island.

The pohutukawa is an introduced plant to Wellington, but it seems so much a part of the natural environment that many Wellingtonians assume it is native to the region.

It is not known when the first pohutukawa was planted in Wellington, but across Cook Strait John Guard planted one at an old whaling station at Oyster Bay, Port Underwood, in 1860. John Guard's tree is still there, in good health, and has recently been registered as a Notable Tree with the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture Notable Trees committee.

One of the early public plantings of pohutukawas in Wellington was in 1880 when a long line of pohutukawa trees was planted in shrub borders along the newly created Thornton Esplanade. This was a Victorian equivalent to modern Oriental Bay, where the populace would



promenade when the weather permitted. The Thornton Esplanade was later engulfed in further harbour reclamation and all trace of the Esplanade and the pohutukawas has long gone.

The planting at Thornton Esplanade was fully exposed to the driving force of Wellington's infamous north west gales and salt spray whipped off the harbour would have been deposited on the trees. This proved that the pohutukawa was a survivor and from that point on it has been a definite and distinctive part of the Wellington scene, and a favourite plant with gardeners.

The largest pohutukawa tree in Wellington is beside the main drive of the Botanic Garden. This tree was planted about 1906 in the home of George Glen who was Parks Supervisor from 1901 to 1918. Glen was an advocate for all native trees, but he obviously recognised the pohutukawa as a great tree for the made use of it in numerous plantings. Quite likely there are trees of similar vintage, and even greater size than the Botanic Garden one, in the Hutt Valley or Wairarapa area where the climate and alluvial soils suit them better.

Glen's successor was J.G. McKenzie, Director of Parks from 1918 to 1947, who made even greater use of the pohutukawa. McKenzie had the Parks nurseries turn out vast numbers of pohutukawa trees and they were planted in city and suburban parks, the town belt, the botanic garden, and extensively as street trees. McKenzie also induced garden groups and citizens to plant pohutukawa trees wherever they could. At the Centennial Exhibition in 1940 he gave a lecture in which he expounded on the virtues of growing pohutukawas on the Wellington Town Belt. It is hardly surprising to learn that McKenzie became known as 'Pohutukawa Mac'.

Today, McKenzie's legacy is most noticeable on the streets of Miramar, Seaburn, Kauri and the steep slopes of the Town Belt.

ONE of McKenzie's plantings was around the tram shelter at Courtenay Place. As these trees grew in all their splendour they became a favourite roosting place for birds and by the 1950s there was a movement afoot to have them felled because tram patrons were often splattered with bird droppings.

This created a tremendous furore and those opposed to the removal were led by Dame Elizabeth Knox-Gilmour. Dame Elizabeth was strongly in favour of protecting all trees and she happened to be Chairman of the Reserves Committee at that time. The controversy hit the headlines and raged for years. Eventually a compromise was reached and the pohutukawas were transplanted to Macalister Park.

to try and make the birds away by spraying them with water. This was only partially successful and it was making the ground so wet that there were fears the tree might suffer.

Various recorded bird alarm calls have been amplified and played through speakers set up in the branches. This kept the sparrows away for a while, but not the starlings.

More recently, stuffed rats were placed on the branches to try and scare the birds away, once again without success.

At the time of writing members of the Wellington Club still had to risk dashing under the branches and every morning council staff were hosing all the pavements clean. It is not a satisfactory arrangement, but so far no one has come up with an answer.

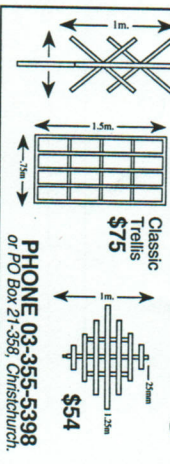
It is to be hoped that a solution can be found, for the patience of the Wellington Club and the City Council must be wearing thin and the loss of this notable tree would be a sad day for Wellington.

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The City Council has gone to great lengths to overcome the problem. At first a sprinkler system was set up in the

Today the pohutukawa grows abundantly throughout the region. It is still a favourite tree of gardeners and the Parks Department, or Cultural and Recreation Division as it is now known. The pohutukawa is also doing very nicely by self-seeding. The seed is produced in vast quantities when the seed cases open in June and July and the seed can often be seen swirling around in blustery Wellington winds. In some areas great drifts occur in the roadside gutters and verges.

Unfortunately the problems were not over. Thousands of sparrows and starlings roost nightly in the tree which is directly above the entrance to the Club and members and visitors have been going through the same trials as the Courtenay Place tram passengers.

Although the germination rate is high there is also a high toll of seedlings. In the higher suburbs like Karori and Johnsonville a hard frost will wipe out most seedlings, but possums, the dry north-

erly winds and Council weed sprays account for a lot too. Many seedlings do manage to survive to maturity, however, and it is often difficult to ascertain if a tree was planted or grew naturally. There is no doubt that the pohutukawa population is increasing and it has been said that pohutukawa is one of Wellington's great wildflowers. In my opinion the pohutukawa is a great tree, but all too often it is planted in the wrong place.

Frequently they are planted over drains - a number of drainways make a living from clearing pohutukawa roots. They are also planted under electricity wires and in time the branches have to be removed - a dangerous job. Frequently when they are planted for shelter it is overlooked that they grow into large trees which have a vigorous and competitive root system that can render all normal gardening activities useless.

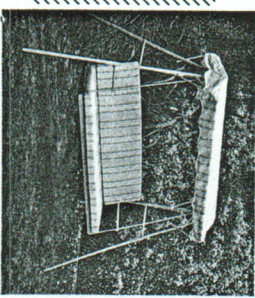
The pohutukawa's root system also has a reputation for bursting through retaining walls. There are many examples around the city, but a particularly noticeable one is in the Truly King garden at Melrose where the brickwork has been broken as if by explosives.

A recent planting that catches the eye is a long sweeping line of pohutukawas on the edge of Portra Harbour, between Portra City and Tihi Bay.

These trees are planted on raised mounds that jut out from the shore line and each mound is supported by attractive stone retaining walls. At present it looks great, the trees are very healthy, but at the back of my mind I can't help wondering how long it will be before the first tree bursts through the stonework.

For visual effect the pohutukawa is superb and as a tree for an exposed site it is great. Surely the best all round hardy tree for Wellington. (Thanks to Walter Cook and Notable Trees Committee for his- toric information.)

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