

# Pohutukawa, jewel of the north

*M. kermadecensis*  
Variegata is perhaps the best of these, its green rounded leaves having yellow margins. When the red flowers appear they certainly make an arresting contrast, admittedly not to everyone's taste.

I prefer to use this compact cultivar in containers. It is particularly effective when used as a focal point in a courtyard or when set against a modern building. It suits a warm sunny position, and tolerates erratic watering and a restricted root system.

The leaves of 'Sunglow' are green in the middle with gold margins, and the new growth has a reddish tinge.

Butterscotch originated as a sport from 'Sunglow'. Its new foliage is reddish-gold, becoming butter-yellow and finally green with age. Reddish stems complete a colourful combination. The contrast between the new and old leaves becomes less pronounced as trees age. It should make a good container subject if regularly cut back.

The foliage of 'Upper Hat' is most unusual, green along the margins and its creamy-yellow centres speckled with green. The light scatter flowers make a conspicuous display against this variegation. 'Gold Finger' has gold leaves with green margins, reddish stems, and good deep crimson flowers.

'Kirkley' is a real weirdo. Small undulating gold leaves with green margins are spaced sparsely along slender erect stems. It looks as though it may be a form of *M. robusta*.

'Ohope' is the most impressive variegated form of true pohutukawa that I have grown. Its large green leaves have a cream margin, and deep red flowers make an impressive summer display. Northern rata (*M. robusta*) is a giant in the forest, but in gardens it grows slowly and can be successfully managed.

This is another species which would benefit from the selection of outstanding forms for gardens. Its red flowers do not appear until many years after planting.

The southern rata (*M. umbellata*) is a plant of high rainfall areas which thrives in moist soils. In gardens it forms a small compact tree with bright red flowers, and glossy green pointed leaves. It also takes several years before commencing flowering.

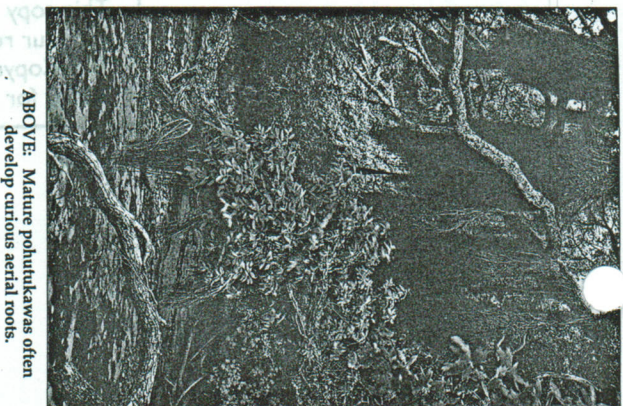
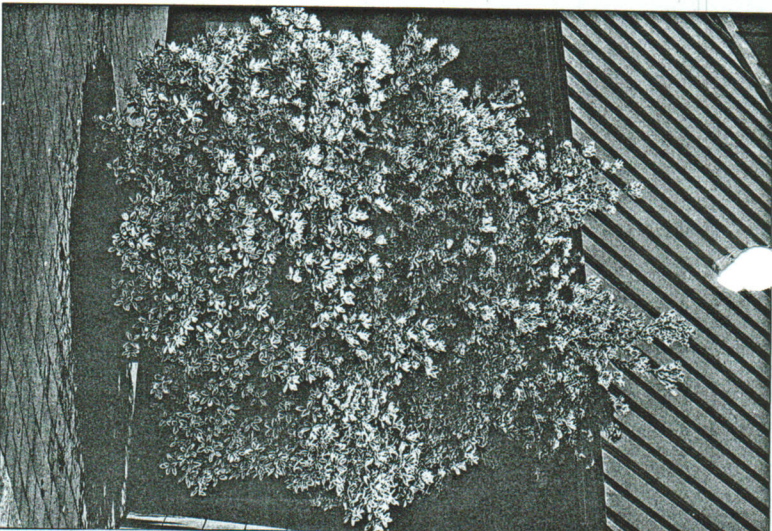
**MESRAL'** is a vigorous hybrid between a pohutukawa and a northern rata with deep red flowers. It was introduced several years ago by Graeme Platt, who discovered it growing alongside the road between Comandale and Kennedy's Bay.

'Maungapiko' was discovered on Great Barrier Island by Graeme Platt. He considers it to be a hybrid between pohutukawa and northern rata, although its flowers are more typical of the vibrant red southern rata. It is ideal for beach sections.

*M. bartlettii* has only recently been introduced into cultivation, where it is performing much better than expected for such a rare plant. Its natural habit is swampy land in the far north, where it has a very limited distribution. In gardens it is proving to be easily grown in average conditions, in both dry and moist soils. In summer, attractive white flowers appear. It commences flowering whilst still quite young, and is easily propagated by cuttings.

Several other raras make useful garden plants. The most flamboyant is *M. carminea*, known commonly as the carmine rata or akakura. Depending on how it is propagated, this species will develop into either a climber or a small dense shrub. When grown from seed or cuttings of juvenile growth, it will climb and can be trained over a fence, trellis or tree trunk. When grown from cuttings of mature adult growth it will become a compact shrub. 'Ferris Wheel' and 'Carousel' remain as shrubs, the latter having variegated foliage.

Whichever way it is grown, in spring the carmine rata will so smother itself with carmine-red flowers that the foliage can barely be seen. It will not tolerate heavy frosts, and is sometimes attacked by thrips which can be controlled by applying an insecticide plus spraying oil in early summer.



ABOVE: Mature pohutukawas often develop curious aerial roots.

where their survival is threatened. Possoms are causing great damage, particularly to trees which are already under stress from other causes. Many pohutukawas are now growing without the plants they once associated with. Where previously the bush grew around and behind them, livestock now graze, trampling their roots and depriving them of their natural litter.

A greater threat to future generations is the presence of weeds such as kikuyu and buffalo grass. Pohutukawa seeds cannot germinate without light, and when they fall amongst these rampant weeds young plants do not appear.

Enterprises such as Project Chimson have prompted considerable debate as to the source of material which should be used for replanting. One view is that only plants with outstanding qualities should be used in replanting programmes, regardless of where they come from. A contrasting view is that the introduction of plants from different districts will compromise the genetic purity of local populations.

My belief is that the objectives of all parties concerned with pohutukawas can be achieved, if a

clear distinction is made between gardening and ecological restoration projects. In some areas where existing populations are under threat, programmes to collect seed from trees growing as close as possible to where they are going to be replanted have already been initiated. The Auckland Regional Council's Parks Service is currently undertaking such a programme in its coastal park network.

In areas where pohutukawas do not grow naturally, outstanding trees from other regions can be planted without harm. These plantings will enable further evaluations to be undertaken, as it takes about ten years for the true worth of a new introduction to be assessed. They will also be a valuable future source of seed. This work will further enhance the reputation of the pohutukawa as a flowering tree of international significance.

I would like to thank the following for their help in compiling this article: Graeme Platt (Plants Native Plants, Albany), Terry Hatch (Oy Nurseries, Pukekohe East), Jim Rumball (Duncan and Davies, Waitara), Ewen Cameron (Auckland Museum), Anne Grace (Auckland Regional Parks Service) and Alex Gardner (Auckland Regional Botanic Gardens).

generally considered to be *M. collina*. It is an outstanding subject for containers or small gardens, producing scarlet flowers intermittently for much of the year. The downy greyish new foliage is also very handsome. It requires a sunny frost free position.

'Spring Fire' is another selection of a Pacific Island species. Recently introduced, it is expected to develop into a medium sized tree, suitable for tubs and smaller gardens. Reddish flowers appear intermittently for long periods, particularly during spring and early summer.

Considerable effort has been made in recent years to save pohutukawas in regions



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