

Pohutukawa under seige

THE NATIVE insect pest, *Neomycta rubida*, is devastating pohutukawa plants and trees in the north of NZ, says NZ native plantsman, Graeme Platt, Platts Nursery, Albany.

"People are blaming opossums for NZ pohutukawa damage but these are only half of the story. It has now been confirmed that this little insect pest is getting into young buds and causing havoc.

"I first noticed the pest was increasing about two years ago. It became more prevalent in the nursery and is affecting *M excelsa*, *kermadecensis*, northern rata and the hybrids.

"*M kermadecensis* (Kermadec Island species) are the first to show signs of damage and are badly affected. The pest appears to be widespread and I am now starting to see damage to plants along roadsides throughout the North.

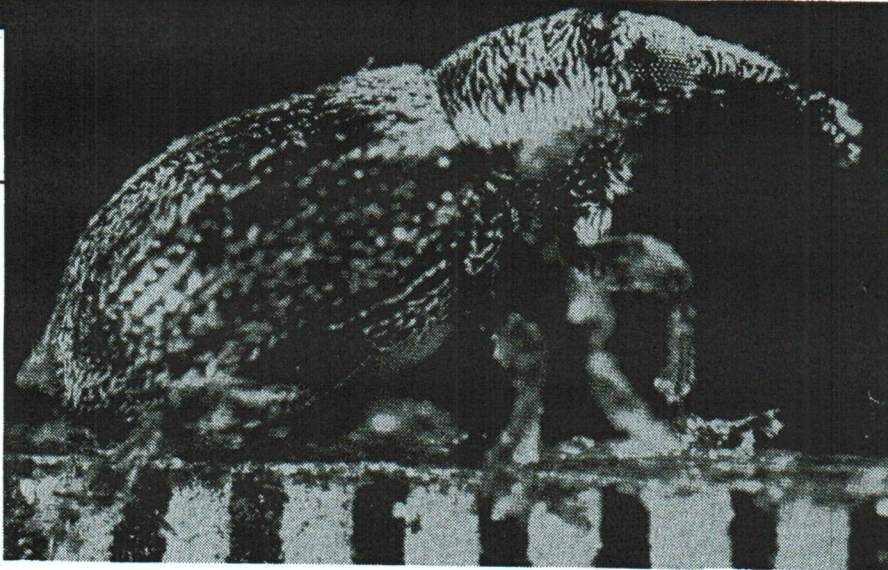
"Chermid was bad enough to have in the nursery but this little beast is very tenacious. Last year I hoped a good frost would clean them out but even those that were frozen solid survived.

"*Neomycta* starts work on closed buds and then has a good feed on young leaves. It keeps knocking back the new growth and tips eventually end up as bare sticks on top of the plant. Buds often remain but this depends on the amount of infestation.

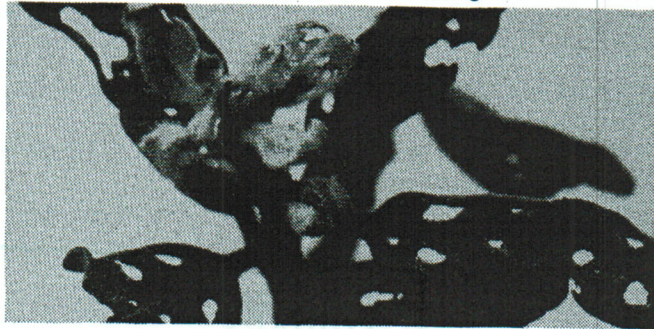
"What concerns me is the sudden explosion in numbers. As it is a native pest it has always been there but something has upset the balance. Plants in production and growing around the property are very badly damaged. It may be the climate change that has brought on the sudden outbreak.

"Regular insecticide spraying with Orthene and spraying oil is the best control."

Photos, taken by Brett McKay, Auckland, demonstrate the effect *Neomycta rubida* is having on young buds and leaves. The foliage looks like it has been blasted by a shotgun. "The insect measures about 5-8mm long (about the size of a black ant) and surprisingly few can do a lot of damage," said Graeme.



Neomycta rubida, sitting on a ruler calibrated in 64ths of an inch and, below some of the leaf damage he is causing



Sheryll Wilson

New executive officer for RNZIH

Sheryll Wilson of Christchurch has been appointed the new Royal NZ Institute of Horticulture executive officer. She replaces Dave Cameron who has become academic registrar at Waikato Polytech, Hamilton.

Sheryll was administration officer at the business studies department, Christchurch Polytech, and has experience in educational administration, finance and computing.

These UK trees could be worth sourcing

While the market for trees is less than buoyant, it may pay NZ growers to get ready for the next boom cycle. Noted trees in UK gardens that might be worth spending time investigating are:

Acer saccharinum Weiri, described as vigorous to 30m. with pendulous exterior branches.

Populus Balsam Spire, an extra fast growing variety that turns to a tower of gold in Autumn.

Salix alba Chermesina, the cork bark willow which is polardard every second year.

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Kerikeri plants hit too

Pungaere Nurseries' Jill Booth said pohutukawas at their Kerikeri business had been hit by the pest too.

"The little blighters are chomping holes in pohutukawa leaves in the nursery. I noticed wild coastal plants showing the same symptoms and the new growth appears to be the most affected.

"We cut out a large, 6-7 metre high, variegated pohutukawa growing near the shop because we thought by eliminating it we would not have so much trouble but plants are still under attack. All varieties are effected except for three Scarlet Pimpernel growing by themselves."

It was too early to tell if the variety was resistant. Jill said there has been little public reaction as yet. One or two customers may have come in asking for advice but these would be treated as normal enquiries.

"Damage does not kill plants. Plants that have been attacked are not saleable but would probably grow if planted out."

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