

PLANT OF THE MONTH – *LEPIDIUM FLEXICAULE*

The plant of the month for October is *Lepidium flexicaule* or Coastal cress, one of nineteen *Lepidium* species native to the New Zealand region. Like most of the native species *L. flexicaule* is a coastal specialist and inhabits the exposed western coastlines of both the North and South islands, from Taranaki south to Greymouth, with one outlier population on the Chatham Islands. The species prefers areas of constant disturbance and high fertility on the coastal fringe, such as seabird colonies and seal haul-outs. It is very salt and wind tolerant and generally lives in the most exposed of coastal situations, in low stature herby 'salt turf' communities. The plant is a perennial rosette forming herb with a woody base and trailing stems. The basal leaves are succulent, narrowly rounded, and pinnately divided into lobes. The tiny white flowers and siliques (pods) are borne on sprawling racemes.



Fig.1 *Lepidium flexicaule*, Point Elizabeth, West Coast, 7 September 2019. (left) foliage, (right) plant. Photos: Rowan Hindmarsh-Walls.

Lepidium flexicaule is most similar to some exotic cresses *L. dydimum* and *L. squamatum*, which may also be found in similar habitats. These two species differ from *L. flexicaule* by having siliques that have warty protuberances and are net-veined. *Lepidium flexicaule* is also similar to another native coastal species, *Lepidium tenuicaule*, but these two species distributions no longer overlap, with the latter only being found in coastal areas of the south eastern South Island.

L. flexicaule is native to New Zealand, with a current threat ranking in this country of Threatened-Nationally Endangered, as it is majorly threatened by both habitat loss and disease. It is found overseas in Tasmania where it is also threatened. Much of the species habitat has been lost due to human induced decimation of most mainland seal and coastal seabird nesting colonies. There is evidence to suggest that the species was once far more widespread than its current distribution. Competition with exotic weeds is also having a major impact. Being a brassica it is affected by the many exotic brassica diseases and pests now present in New Zealand, including aphids, whitefly, the cabbage white butterfly, powdery mildew, and mosaic viruses. The species is now conservation dependent, meaning it requires human intervention to stop it going extinct.

The genus *Lepidium* is the latin name for cress and is probably derived from the Greek 'lepidos' or scale, referring to the shape of the pods. The species epithet 'flexicaule' is Latin for flexible-stemmed, probably referring to the trailing nature of the plant.

You can view the NZPCN website factsheet for *Lepidium flexicaule* at: http://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora_details.aspx?ID=109