

The significance of rengarenga *Arthropodium* *cirratum* to Maori.



Fig 1. Flowers of *Arthropodium cirratum*

Graham Harris.

School of Natural Resources.

Te Kura Matauranga Rawa Whenua.

The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand.

The paper discusses the importance of rengarenga to Maori and evidence outlining the use of the plant as a food source and for medicinal, spiritual and other cultural purposes including its representation in kowhaiwhai patterns is presented based on historical and recent documents, and oral history.

Introduction:

Rengarenga *Arthropodium cirratum* is a lily which colonises rocky coastal areas from the North Cape to a southern limit from Kaikoura to Greymouth. It is often referred to as the New Zealand rock lily.

An alternative Maori name for the plant, maikaika, is shared with two native orchids (*Orthocerus strictum* and *Thelymitra pulchella*) that have similar starchy, edible rootlike tubers. (Crowe 1995)

Rengarenga is not common in the wild in some regions of its habitat and is classified by the Department of Conservation as being vulnerable in the Wellington conservancy. The plant forms extensive colonies and in summer bears panicles of six petalled white flowers on 30 cm stalks. The flowers have purple and yellow stamens which are curled at the ends and give rise to the specific name *cirratum* (curled).

Significance to Maori:

Information about the importance of rengarenga as a food source for Maori and its cultural and spiritual significance was recorded by William Colenso who, along with Elsdon Best, published much of the early ethnobotanical¹ information in New Zealand. Colenso also recorded information about the medicinal properties of the plant and how it was utilised by Maori for that purpose.

Spiritual:

Rengarenga is recorded by Tregear (1926:496) as being one of the five sacred mauri or talismans, those things possessed of the soul of the Maori people. It is referred to in the *whakatauaaki* or proverb "*Me ai ki te hua o te rengarenga me whakapakari ki te hua o te kawariki*". -May you be nourished by the fruit of the rengarenga and of the kawariki² (Williams 1992:251)

Kerr 1995 (pers. comm.) stated that this proverb relates to the Maori land wars of the 1860's in the Waikato when the Waikato Maori were being forced back into the King Country and were threatened with the loss of their land. The proverb means -*even though we may be dispossessed, we will survive on what we can gather from the fruits of the land.*

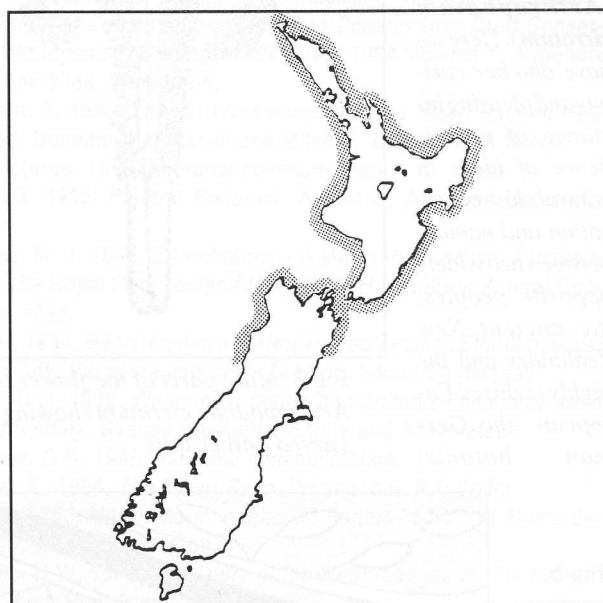


Fig 2. Distribution

Fig 4.



Riley (1994:116) noted in *Maori Healing and Herbal- New Zealand Ethnobotanical Sourcebook*, that an inner meaning indicates that men as fodder for the controller of war, Tu, will be plentiful for that purpose. It is claimed that the spirits of such warriors, when killed in war, travelled to Cape Reinga in great style, carrying weapons, dancing and talking and making much noise. The spirits of those dying of natural causes, on the other hand, travelled to Cape Reinga silently waving branches of rengarenga as they moved. Riley also noted that rengarenga once lay in a place of honour on the tuahu (sacred place) at Whangara (north of Gisborne)

Kowhaiwhai patterns:

The rafters of Maori whareniui (meeting houses) are often decorated with elaborate scroll-like patterns known as kowhaiwhai. These usually are painted in red, white and black, although the pattern shown in Figure 5. is grey, brown and white. The motif of the patterns in general, represent natural objects (Hamilton 1896:118).

Neich 1993:34 noted that some, have mythological associations and that the chief connotation of kowhaiwhai seems to relate to ideas of genealogy and descent. The rengarenga flower is represented in several kowhaiwhai patterns underlining the significance of the plant to Maori.

Colenso 1891:460 in describing kowhaiwhai patterns wrote:

“One in particular, I may mention and explain: this pattern was called rengarenga, from being an imitation of, or an ideal association with the curved anthers of the flowers of that plant, the New Zealand lily (Arthropodium cirratum). Here we have another curious and pleasing instance of coincidence of ideas in natural close observation and naming between two widely opposite peoples, the ancient New Zealander and the highly civilised European -the German botanist

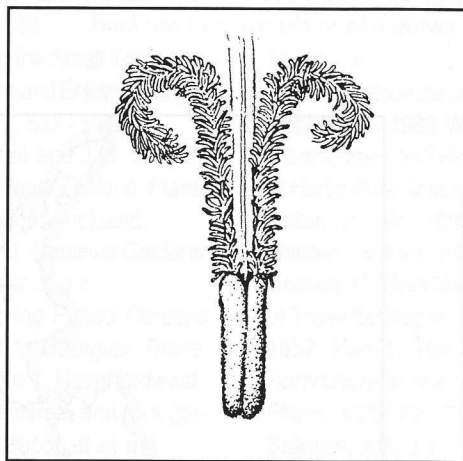


Fig 3. Male parts of the flower of *Arthropodium cirratum* showing the curved anther tails

Forster who accompanied Cook on his second voyage to New Zealand and who gave the appropriate specific name of cirratum to this plant from its peculiar closely-curved and revolute anthers” (see fig 3).

Despite an extensive search, the kowhaiwhai pattern described by Colenso could not be located nor could any other patterns incorporating rengarenga anther patterns.

Simmons 1995 (pers. comm.) noted that the flowers of the rengarenga plant were sometimes incorporated into other kowhaiwhai patterns³ such as that shown in Fig 4. This was in the house *Te Poho o Haraina* which stood at Patutahi near Gisborne and was the house of *Wi Pere* of the *Rongowhakaata iwi*. It was opened in 1885 and burnt down in 1947. The basic pattern is similar to that identified by Hamilton 1896:127, as *Ngutukura* (the whale) but this version incorporates stylised rengarenga flowers. Simmons indicated that these four petalled flowers (rengarenga actually has six petals) were known as *popoa rengarenga* and refer to the gods, whereas flowers with more than four petals refer to men.

The pattern shown in Fig 5, is reported by Simmons to be from a house in the Bay of Plenty-East Coast area and was painted on narrow flat rafters. Simmons noted that the stalks and unopened flowers of rengarenga were rendered quite realistically.

Food:

Colenso (1880:30) recorded that rengarenga was one of the few native plants cultivated by Maori for food. He wrote:

“The thick fleshy roots of the New Zealand lily Arthropodium cirratum, were also formerly eaten, cooked in the earth oven. This plant grows to a very large size in suitable soil, and when cultivated in gardens. From this circumstance, and from not unfrequently noticed it about old deserted residences and cultivations, I am inclined to believe that it was also cultivated.”

The author observed that wild plants growing in their natural habitat tend to produce small tightly congested rhizomes and often grow on rock faces almost like epiphytes, whereas the same plants grown in cultivated soil, produce much larger rhizomes.

Riley 1994:416 noted that rengarenga rhizomes when roasted or cooked in a steam oven (umu) have a flavour not unlike potato. This was confirmed by the author who reported that after steaming rhizomes for 60 minutes, the younger sections nearest the growing points, were soft and tender, while the older more mature sections were very fibrous and not as palatable.

The rhizomes of a related plant, vanilla lily *Arthropodium*

Fig 5.



milleflorum are eaten by Australian Aborigines. (Sainty 1989:46)

Medicinal:

Maori were highly skilled in using herbs in conjunction with spiritual healing (Riley 1994:9)

Riley noted that boils and abscesses were one of the main surgical complaints that afflicted Maori in pre-European times and into the early 20th century and referred to the report of the Colonial Hospital Wellington, for the year 1848 which listed abscesses as fourth equal with lung inflammation as cause of death among Maori patients.

Riley also noted in *Maori Healing and Herbal* that "no less one-fifth of the some 200 plants in this book are used to treat boils and abscesses"

Rengarenga was one of the plants used for the treatment of boils and abscesses and Colenso 1868:267 recorded that the roots of the rengarenga were roasted and beaten to a pulp and applied warm to unbroken tumours or abscesses. White (1883) recorded that the bottom or lower end of the leaves is beaten into a pulp as a poultice to cure ulcers or longstanding sores and to allay swelling of joints or limbs. He also noted that the root of the plant was eaten in its raw state to cure the itch, although he did not specify the exact nature of this complaint.

More recent publications on medicinal uses of native plants including Riley 1994, and Brooker *et al* 1981:63, refer to the above two publications (White and Colenso) for medicinal uses of *Arthropodium cirratum*.

Enquiries made by the author indicate that rengarenga does not appear to be used for medicinal purposes today.

Notes:

1. Parsons 1992:73, defined ethnobotany as "the scientific study of people and plants and the interaction between them"
2. *Ranunculus macrocarpus* and *R. rivularis*
3. Figs 4 and 5 were drawn by the author from photos, sketches and descriptions provided by D.R. Simmons, former curator of Ethnology at Auckland Museum.

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Fig 6. *Rengarenga* rhizomes which provided a food source for Maori. This plant was growing on a rocky outcrop at Matakiti-a-Kupe (Cape Palliser) and has smaller rhizomes than those of plants grown in cultivated soil. (photo: Rob Lucas)

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