

By Pamela McGeorge, NZ Gardener

An old New Zealand identity

YOU can't be a New Zealander if you weren't born under a pohutukawa tree," declared Graeme Platt. Born and raised in the Deep South, I had to object. "Okay," he conceded, and modified his definition slightly, if unconvincingly. "It's a cultural bonding thing for northerners," he continued. "A beach is not a beach without a pohutukawa." Further remonstrance was obviously futile.

And unbidden came to mind the image of a curving bay, any one of hundreds in the Far North with white sand, thankfully calm water, and gnarled pohutukawa scrambling down a cliff side, haven after many a fraught voyage under sail . . .

I think I know how Cook and his sailors must have felt, and the Polynesian adventurers too when they finally reached these shores and saw just such a calm bay with its mighty twisted pohutukawa, symbol of tenacity and adaptability.

What other tree will bed itself in rock, withstand howling blasts of salt laden spray and celebrate its meagre lot with brilliant scarlet blossom?

It was the blossom that attracted botanical artist Sarah Featon last century to paint the pohutukawa, among other native plants, and with her husband produce in 1889, *The Art Album of New Zealand Flora*. It made history for it was the first fully coloured art book to be printed in New Zealand. They produced the book to show how false was the idea that "there are no flowers in New Zealand".

In the preface to the book, Edward Featon wrote of the pohutukawa: "To the settlers it is known as the 'Christmas tree' and sprays of its foliage and flowers are used to decorate the interiors of churches and dwellings during the festive Christmas-tide. The time-honoured plum pudding is likewise garnished with its floral offerings and it serves to keep fresh in the minds of

many the once-loved holly of the old land."

Obviously another North Islander talking.

He mentioned its significance to the Maori with the tree at Cape Reinga where the spirits of their dead are supposed to descend by root to an opening said to be the entrance to 'Te Reinga'.

"Grim, gaunt and weird
Adorned with strange fantastic arms
It stands, a silent beacon
To departing shades;
A leafy portal to the gates
Of dark and mystic worlds."

He also described how the Maori used its flowers to catch tui. The birds came to sip its flowers, called by the peculiar cry of the fowler, who, when the birds were close enough gave a quick jerk of a running noose and caught them by the leg, an "easy prey to their credulity".

This is a tree which he told us was obtainable from nurserymen in Auckland "who have been eminently successful in raising seedlings".

Graeme Platt is passionate about native trees, and their use as garden plants. Like the nurserymen of last century, mentioned by Edward Featon, he has been instrumental in making them available to gardeners.

He has devoted years to searching out pohutukawa which will make spectacular landscaping trees.

With Jack Hobbs and Terry Hatch he has searched coastal North Island areas, around the lakes of Rotorua and on off-shore islands, seeking always trees which are outstanding for their luxuriant foliage and good growth habit, their large flower sprays and long, brightly coloured stamens. Smaller trees have deliberately been selected, with the home gardener in mind.

From 10,000 trees, Jack Hobbs said, there may be two which are worth selecting for commercial propagation.

TOP RIGHT: Pohutukawa flowers come in many shades in addition to the much loved crimson, as this selection gathered by Graeme Platt demonstrates.

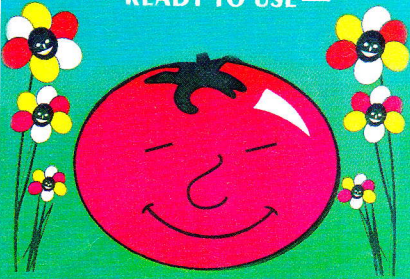
(Photo - Jack Hobbs.)

FAR RIGHT: This yellow pohutukawa flowers profusely every December in the small Taranaki town of Mokau. (Photo - Pat Greenfield.)

RIGHT: A biscuit coloured pohutukawa arouses interest every December at Shakespeare Park, north of Auckland. (Photo - Pat Greenfield.)

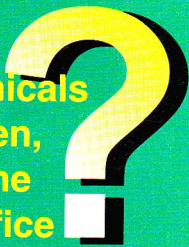
Previous pages: Pohutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsa*) on Tiritiri Matangi Island, Hauraki Gulf. (Photo - Pat Greenfield.)

Beat-A-Bug
INSECT SPRAY
& NATURAL PLANT FOOD
— READY TO USE —



With **NATURAL GARLIC**
NATURAL CHILLI
NATURAL PYRETHRINS

Do you like
using chemicals
in the garden,
in your home
or at the office



If the answer is NO then
Beat-A-Bug™ is for you

Beat-A-Bug

Is a healthy, safe,
environmentally friendly
way to kill bugs and
insects.

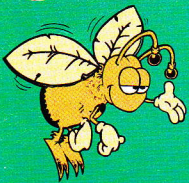
Beat-A-Bug

Kills and Repels

Aphids on your roses
White fly on your tomatoes
Grubs on your vegetables
Flies around your barbecue
And other insect pests

Beat-A-Bug

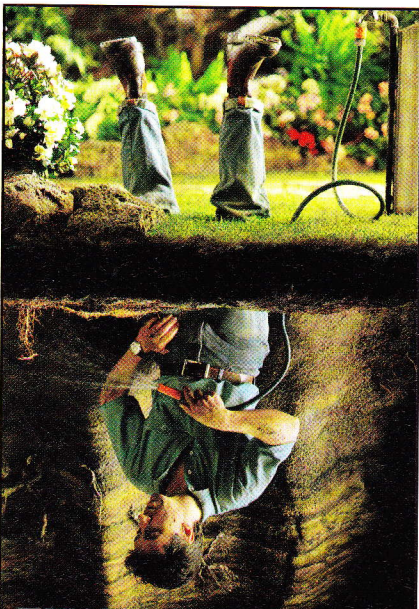
Is safe, easy
to use and
very effective.
Try it TODAY!



Available from your local garden Centre

Marketed by: Bayliss Nurseries, Christchurch
Omaio Nursery, Tauranga





**THERE'S ONLY ONE
WAY TO WATER THIS
WELL...**

AQUAPORE™

A better way to water.

- "Weeps" water directly to the roots.
- Aquapore™ uses up to 70% less water because there is no loss through evaporation, wind, misdirected spray or run off.
- Aquapore™ helps prevent foliage disease by keeping water away from the leaves.
- Aquapore™ discourages weed growth by targeting plant roots.
- Deep watering promotes stronger root growth.
- Aquapore™ is easier to install and maintain than other systems.
- Aquapore™ waters awkward spots like narrow garden strips easily.
- Aquapore's unique composition allows uniform water distribution along its entire length.



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
Ph: **0800 MARLEY** (0800 627 539)

MARLEY AQUAPORE™
AVAILABLE FROM SELECTED:

Benchmark, Mitre 10, Placemakers,
Carters, ITM and leading Garden
Hardware outlets.



An old New Zealand identity

"Populations of trees differ from area to area. They're like people - every one is individual. They're incredibly variable."

Blossom comes in colours from cream and buff through pink, crimson, scarlet or orange. Some colours are very vibrant; some quite dull. Jack prefers red flowers. "To me, many that aren't scarlet are quite innocuous. To me, a real one is red or scarlet." He remembers one tree in Poverty Bay which was so brilliant, they saw it in the distance from the deck of a boat before they had even anchored. "We saw the glow from the mouth of the river. The whole tree was covered with flowers."

Outstanding selections of *Metrosideros excelsa* are 'Vibrance', which has great foliage and flowers well every year with very intense colour; 'Firestone', a deep glowing red, selected in Coromandel, and 'Te Kaha', another Platt selection.

For large gardens 'Parnell' will form a magnificent specimen. It has been propagated by tissue culture from a huge venerable tree at Judges Bay in Parnell, Auckland. A great tree for children to play on, was Jack's comment. With this in mind, forward planning might be necessary!

The main objection to pohutukawa as garden trees is their size - they are naturally a wide-spreading plant. Trained however on a single leader, this is no longer a problem. Most young trees will have five or six leaders. Take out two, Graeme suggests, select the dominant remaining one and about every six months keep topping the smaller ones until they are gradually overcome. Established as a tree with a single trunk, it can be pruned.

Flowering habits of pohutukawa vary from year to year. "Sometimes we have a vintage year when they all flower at once. Other years they flower separately." But Graeme is convinced that stressed trees flower more profusely. He remembers a pohutukawa his father had grown for thirty years. Well fed with compost and lovingly tended, it stubbornly refused to flower in all that time. His father lost patience.

"Platts never do things by halves. He thought of the natural habitat of pohutukawa and fed it with a sack of salt. It was either that or chop the tree down. Everything around the tree burned to a crisp but the pohutukawa burst triumphantly into flower - and continued to flower every year after that." A liberal dressing of potash would have a similar effect.

A cutting grown pohutukawa will

usually flower in its first year, but subjecting it to stress before the shortest day will help. Remove it to a glasshouse in May. Leave it there until August, suggested Graeme, watering it only sufficiently to keep it alive and the lack of moisture will force it to flower well.

Plants grown from seed will not usually flower until attaining a height of about three metres. The trees produce prolific seed, so minute as individual grains that it appears as brownish powder or dust. It needs light to germinate and where pohutukawa grow luxuriantly (and eliminate light) or are surrounded by weeds, the seeds fail. In fact, the inhibition of natural regenerating ground is the biggest threat to pohutukawa in many areas.

Disliking heavy frosts, *Metrosideros excelsa* is native to the upper half of the North Island on both coasts, around the central lakes and in the Far North, but given an environment protected from frost, pohutukawa will grow happily in southern regions. Many have been planted with spectacular success as street trees in Wellington.

And yes - they can be seen in the South Island - on Banks Peninsula and around some parts of Dunedin, while a large specimen thrives at Jackson's Bay on the West Coast.

It's also a tree to grow in a container although it will require good drainage and frequent watering. Given their often rugged form in nature, pohutukawa have the attributes to make fine bonsai.

Perhaps, like me, you're not one whose citizenship was conferred by birth beneath this glorious tree, but perhaps like me, you can grow one in a tub.

Selection of good forms of *Metrosideros excelsa* for commercial propagation is on-going and names of selections do change. Those seeking pohutukawa for landscaping purposes may not be able to find the selections mentioned in this article but similar ones are available.

Duncan and Davies distribute to garden centres throughout the country. 'Flame Crest', 'Royal Flame' and 'Gold Finger', with a variegated leaf, are amongst the selections which they market.

Taupo Native Plant Nursery, Terra Firma Limited, freight throughout the country and sell a wide variety of selections and eco-sourced seedlings of *Metrosideros excelsa*. Phone: 07 378 5450, Fax: 07 378 6038.