

# Pohutukawa, jewel of the north

Story and photos by Jack Hobbs



**T**HE pohutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsa*) is widely regarded as one of the world's great flowering trees. Because it varies so much in the wild, nurserymen have been selecting individuals for many years to introduce into cultivation.

Considerable variation occurs in the flowers of pohutukawas, colours including pinks, yellow, orange, apricot and many shades of crimson and scarlet.

Different trees also vary greatly in their habit, foliage and bark. Aerial roots are common, and in extreme cases these resemble huge beards hanging from the branches.

Individuals also differ considerably in their eventual size. A specimen in Auckland's Parnell Rose Garden, christened 'Parnell', is about 40 metres in diameter. It produces an abundance of large red flowers most summers, but was selected mainly for its majestic habit. Plants are available, but obviously are suitable for large gardens only.

The abundance of bloom produced by pohutukawas differs from year to year. Last summer was a brilliant season for most trees, although some which normally flower well hardly flowered at all.

Pohutukawa should receive some initial training according to their location and use. In gardens where space is lim-

ited they are generally best grown on a single trunk, allowing branching to occur about two metres or more above ground. This requires the continual removal of side branches and suckers for the first few years.

In a more natural setting near the beach, it may be decided to allow a more typical habit to develop, with multiple leaders arising from the base. This will result in a much wider, spreading tree.

Because individual trees differ in so many of their characteristics, it is important to consider all of these when making selections. Graeme Platt, of Platts Native Plants in Albany, has been evaluating pohutukawas for over fifteen years and looks for the following characteristics: flowers should be large with long stamens and prominent pollen, and they should be produced in large quantities reliably every summer; their colour should be bright, and when in flower they should produce little veg-

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**ABOVE:** A pohutukawa trained on a single trunk is the ideal in gardens.

**RIGHT:** A good form of pohutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsa*). The flowers of plants in the wild vary considerably.





etative growth so that their flowers are not concealed.

Graeme prefers trees which flower inside the canopy of the tree as well as outside, this not being a typical characteristic of most pohutukawas.

When selecting, flowers are only one characteristic which should be considered. The trees should have a good strong structure with a clean appearance, rather than the twiggy growth of some specimens. Specimens with a very erect narrow habit can be useful as street trees and where space is limited.

Large glossy leaves are preferable to those which are small and dull.

The potential also exists for frost resistant selections to be introduced. Although the pohutukawa is mainly a coastal tree which does not tolerate frosts, it also occurs around the Rotorua lakes. Admittedly it is often growing there in the relative warmth of thermal vents, but selections from areas such as this may produce relatively hardy cultivars.

In frost prone areas larger plants, especially those which have developed their adult foliage, are most likely to survive. They are still likely to tolerate light frosts only.

Graeme Platt has done much of his pohutukawa hunting with Terry Hatch. Together this intrepid duo have covered vast areas and looked at tens of thousands of trees in search of perfect specimens. The area between Whakatane and East Cape in particular contains many outstanding trees, as well as several excellent hybrids.

They say that of all the trees they have looked at no two are the same - that they are as individual as people. Graeme considers that many previous introductions were chosen only because they had unusual features, such as variegated leaves, rather than overall excellence.

'Vibrance' has particularly impressed me. The name is an appropriate description of the bright scarlet flowers which have an iridescent orange glow. Its stamens are exceptionally long, and the long rounded leaves are very handsome.

It forms a medium sized tree ideal for gardens and for growing in large tubs. It flowers on older bare wood inside the tree as well as outside, and grows easily from cuttings. The original tree was discovered in Waiomu Bay, Coromandel, and Terry Hatch regards it as their best selection yet. It is currently being produced in large numbers, but will not be available in garden centres until 1993.

Several other Platt/Hatch selections are currently under evaluation. The following four are particularly promising, and although not yet widely available they are worth watching out for in future.

'Firestone' has bright orange-red flowers and pointed leaves. It was found

in Coromandel in an area where Graeme collected stones to build his fireplace.

'Te Kaha' is an outstanding small tree found in the Bay of Plenty. It may become larger in gardens but should still be suitable for tubs and where space is limited. It has red flowerheads with very long stamens, and large handsome leaves.

'Tamaki' has large red flowers with an orange glow, and an attractive upright habit. The original tree is growing along Auckland's Tamaki Drive.

'Hauraki' was chosen for the outstanding red flowers it produces. It is a tall erect tree growing in Long Bay Regional Park, where a wide range of interesting forms can be seen, including some with flowers in shades of pink, cream or yellow.

Many other nurserymen have made their own selections over the years. Duncan and Davies have evaluated approximately 25 selections from the Taranaki District since 1976, and now have about eight in production. Most of these have developed into narrow erect trees when grown at their Waitara Nursery.

JIM Rumbal, Duncan and Davies' manager of new developments, tells me that most of their plants are grafted because cuttings are more difficult and slower to strike. Several of their cultivars were originally selected by that grand Waitara plantsman, Felix Jury.

'Flame Crest' is a tall erect tree of oval shape which produces a heavy crop of orange-scarlet flowers every year. Jim Rumbal rates it particularly highly.

'Fire Mountain' has very bright orange-scarlet flowers, and a wider growth habit than 'Flame Crest'. It was discovered by Felix Jury growing on the banks of the Waitara River.

'Scarlet Pimpernel' was another Felix Jury selection, and the first cultivar released by Duncan and Davies. It is regarded by Jim Rumbal as still the best scarlet. It forms a smallish tree, and all its flowers open simultaneously.

'Royal Flame' produces dark red flowers late in the season. Golden pollen enhances the flowers, which despite their deep colour are still bright.

*Metrosideros excelsa* 'Aurea' has sulphur-yellow flowers, but although it is unusual I much prefer the reds. For many years Duncan and Davies produced this variety from seed, but now offer a cutting grown selection as 'Moon Maiden'.

'Pink Lady' is a small upright tree with pinkish flowers. 'Christmas Cheer' is an interesting selection by Rob Bayly, of Bayly Nursery in Gisborne. It produces large crimson flowers in distinctive clusters at about Christmas time.

Several cultivars with variegated leaves are available, most being forms or hybrids of the Kermadec pohutukawa, *M. kermadecensis*.

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*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 Hutt' is most unusual, green along the margins and its creamy-yellow centres speckled with green. The light scarlet flowers make a conspicuous display against this variegation.

'Gold Finger' has gold leaves with green margins, reddish stems, and good deep crimson flowers.

'Krinkley' 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 a 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.

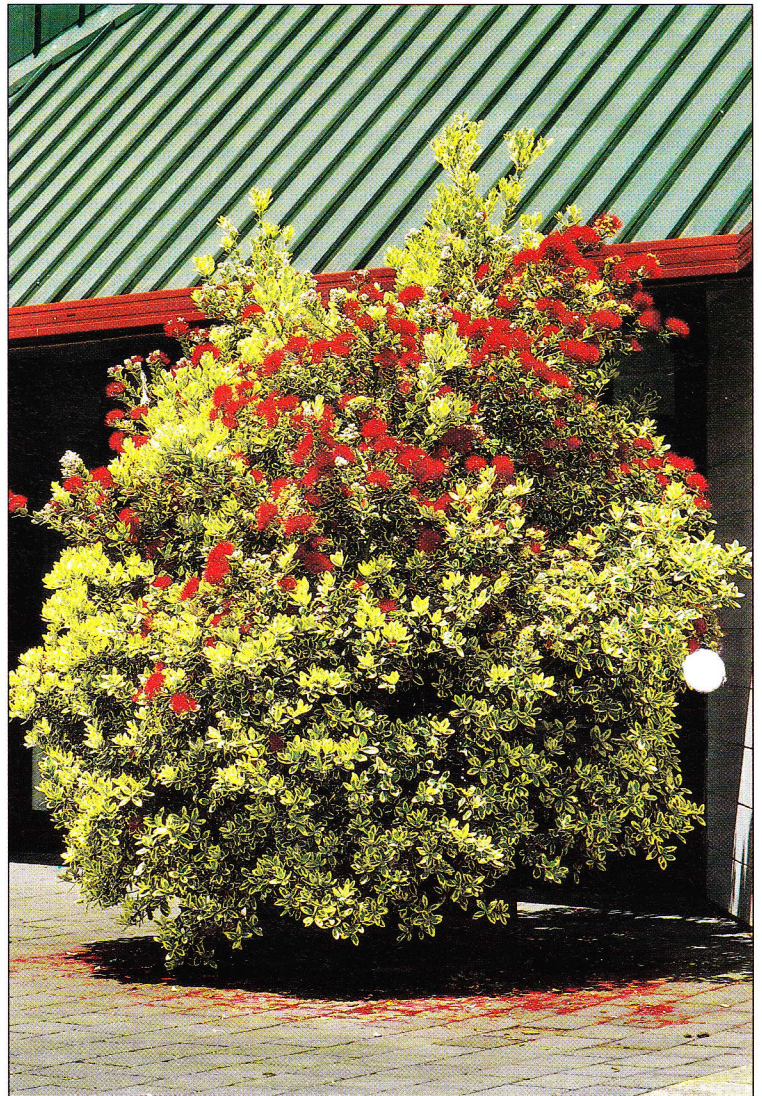
The southern rata (*M. umbellata*) is a plant of high rainfall areas which thrives in moist soils. In gardens it forms a small compact tree with bright red flowers, and glossy green pointed leaves. It also takes several years before commencing flowering.

'MISTRAL' 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 Coromandel 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 ratas also 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 juve-



nile 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.

'Tahiti' is a dwarf selection of a Pacific Island species,

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

**ABOVE: *Metrosideros kermadecensis* 'Variegata' is the best of the variegated foliage pohutukawas. It makes a striking focal point for a courtyard when grown in a big container and tolerates erratic watering.**



ABOVE: Mature pohutukawas often develop curious aerial roots.

where their survival is threatened. Possums 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 Crimson 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 (Platts Native Plants, Albany), Terry Hatch (Joy Nurseries, Pukekohe East), Jim Rumbal (Duncan and Davies, Waitara), Ewen Cameron (Auckland Museum), Anne Grace (Auckland Regional Parks Service) and Alex Gardiner (Auckland Regional Botanic Gardens). ❁

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