

BORDER CROSSINGS

ORIGINS

BOTANY BAY LEARNING RESOURCES

New Zealand Flax



Phormium tenax, New Zealand flax, in Piha, West Auckland, New Zealand

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phormium_tenax#/media/File:NZflaxPiha02.jpg



Phormium colensoi - Savill Garden - Windsor , Great Park, England

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Phormium_colensoi_\(Phormium_cookianum\)_-_Savill_Garden_-_Windsor_Great_Park_England_-_DSC05006.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Phormium_colensoi_(Phormium_cookianum)_-_Savill_Garden_-_Windsor_Great_Park_England_-_DSC05006.jpg)

What do Indigenous people call this plant?

The Māori use the names “harakeke” and “wharariki” for plants that are now commonly known as New Zealand Flax. Harakeke is the more common variety growing in lowland swamps, with leaves growing up to two metres and yellow and red flowers. Wharariki is less common, grows in more mountainous regions, has smaller leaves and has yellow and orange flowers. Although these plants are widely known as New Zealand Flax, they are not related to the flax (linseed) plants found in the Northern hemisphere.

When was this plant first documented?

New Zealand Flax was first documented by Captain Cook when his ships reached New Zealand in October 1769. He wrote, "Of the leaves of these plants, with very little preparation, they (the Māori) make all their common apparel; and of these they make also their strings, lines and cordage ...". They also made baskets, mats and fishing nets from undressed flax. Māori practised advanced weft twining in phormium fibre cloaks"

How many varieties of this plant are known?

There are two varieties of flax (harakeke and wharariki) but there are many variants based on these two varieties. The Māori recognise nearly 60 variants.

Where and how was the plant originally grown and used?

Māori communities cultivated plantations ("pa harakeke" - a planting of selected varieties of harakeke) to ensure vigorous, healthy bushes that would provide the best leaf and fibre qualities for their needs.

How do Indigenous people relate to this plant?

The Māori use flax widely. It is the primary material used in clothing including belts, cloaks, loin cloths, rain capes, sandals and skirts. The strength and durability of flax makes it ideal for sandals, fishing nets, sails, bird snares, ropes, floor mats, wall coverings and basket making. Flax ropes are used to build houses and boats. The softer fibres of flax can be used to make mattresses for babies.

Flax is also valued by Māori for its medicinal properties. The leaves, gum, roots and stalks of the flax plant can be made into disinfectants, laxatives, ointments for skin disorders, stomach upsets to treat wounds, and swollen joints.

When and how did this plant first come to Britain?

New Zealand Flax came to the UK around 200 years ago. In 1823, Captain John Kent took large quantities of flax and 25 flax plants from New Zealand to England. The quality of the flax rope was so good that the English Navy became one of the largest users of New Zealand Flax. However, New Zealand Flax was not widely grown in the UK and is now predominantly used as an ornamental garden plant.

Special properties

The Māori use the nectar from the flowers for medicinal purposes and as a sweetener. Boiled and crushed roots can be made into a poultice for abscesses, boils, burns, rheumatic pains, ringworm, tumours, to treat toothache, scalds and sores. The juice from the roots can be used as a disinfectant, and drunk to relieve constipation and treat parasites. The sap produced by harakeke contains enzymes that aid blood clotting and antiseptic qualities which help with healing. It is also a mild anaesthetic. Splints can be made from "korari" (flower stalks) and leaves, and fine cords of muka fibre utilise the clotting properties of the gel before being used to stitch wounds. Harakeke is used as a bandage and can secure broken bones in the same way as plaster.

Fun facts

Māori have been using New Zealand Flax for as long as they have been in New Zealand - since around 1200 - 1300AD.

Resources edited by Phil Hindmarsh. Project Manager Marine Begault.

BOTANY BAY is a participation and learning project by Border Crossings' ORIGINS Festival, made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund. Thanks to National Lottery players, we have been able to engage five schools across the country with the Indigenous heritage of plants, gardens and food.



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