

Last Word

Floristically challenged native plants

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There's a big fashion at present for planting native trees, and sometimes I think that people promoting this fashion are a little like horses wearing blinkers.

It just doesn't make sense, from either a horticultural or a silvicultural viewpoint, to push indigenous trees into gardens and public parks at the expense of the best introduced ones.

It is true that New Zealand has a distinctive flora, of sorts, with a relatively large number, compared with the total flora, of species that do not occur anywhere else. But this is largely a consequence of New Zealand being an isolated group of oceanic islands. When you start looking at the plants as family groups it becomes painfully obvious that while we have numerous endemic species we have very few endemic families. And the families with ornamental trees that have become icons of the New Zealand culture, if you can call it a culture, have by and large attained a much higher degree of development and diversity elsewhere.

Eight species of kowhai, all with yellow flowers, are now recognised in New Zealand, seven of them capable of reaching tree size and the other a shrub. Elsewhere in the world there are upwards of 50 more species in the genus *Sophora*, ranging from subshrubs with blue or mauve flowers to

forest giants with white ones.

New Zealand has a few species of pohutukawa, a few of rata, one or more likely several of kanuka, one of manuka. All these belong in the myrtle family, which in contrast has reached a staggering level of diversity across the Tasman with 700 or more eucalypts, a number of other closely related trees, at least 50 cousins of the manuka, and 30 or so cousins of kanuka, mostly with larger and more colourful flowers than the New Zealand species. As a floristic experience, the New Zealand flora is, well, a couple of spoons short of a picnic.

I've been racking my brains for names of native flowering trees to match the beauty and adaptability of the magnolias and cherries of Japan, the horse-chestnuts of Europe and the Himalaya, the tulip tree of North America, the judas tree of the eastern Mediterranean, the rhododendrons of the Himalaya and Yunnan, the dove-tree of China, the dogwoods of North America.

What have we got? The pohutukawa is strictly for frost-free districts near the sea, the southern rata is painfully slow and unpredictable, and neither stacks up against the pink flowering gums of Australia. The rewarewa, one of our two representatives of the protea family, is simply outclassed by its

Australian and South African relatives. The kowhai can be pretty trees, and probably every garden should have at least one, but as flowering leguminous trees go they lack the floristic brilliance, not to mention the autumn colour, of the judas tree or the redbuds of North America.

But wait, there's more. New Zealand's flora may be floristically challenged, but it has other values. The key word is foliage.

For foliage and textural effects, there are some spectacular native plants: the flaxes, the cabbage trees, the lancewoods, the tree ferns, the broadleaves, and plants like the puka and the nikau palm for warmer areas. Climate permitting, any or all of these are important ingredients in garden plans, both on their own terms and as complements to the flowers from abroad.

So if you are planning a garden this winter, by all means include a few distinctive native foliage plants. They have an important place. Just try not to be sucked in to the philosophy that natives are the best thing since sliced bread. The plain fact is that most of them lack flower power.

Figure 1. "The flaxes, the cabbage trees, ... the tree ferns" making their presence felt in the landscape. Photo courtesy Pete Lockhart.

