

Chatham Island forget-me-nots

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It's a safe bet that many of us have tried to grow in our gardens the fabled Chatham Island forget-me-not (*Myosotidium hortensia*) at some time or another. It's an equally safe bet that there have been numerous failures even after reading that a good stoush of sea water or a dead fish buried beneath is a sure path to success. Only occasionally does one see it thriving when cultivated in the North and South Islands of New Zealand – isolated clumps perhaps but seldom a big drift of bright blue flowers held over broad, glossy green leaves. The place to see them in abundance is in their native home – early October is the best month to make the pilgrimage and if you time it right what a spectacle greets the traveller.

Chatham Island forget-me-nots are classed as 'nationally vulnerable' in the wild. Julian Matthews described one of the wild locations in *The New Zealander's Garden*, a book he co-authored with me in 1985, now long out of print. This was a tiny unnamed island off Point Munning at the north-eastern tip of Chatham (Rekohu) Island where he described it "as almost swamped by pāua shells washed by stormy seas." Another such place is a kilometre or so east, near Kaingaroa, a tiny settlement on the edge of the sea. Of the two sites this is the more easily reached. Hiking between thickets of the endemic *Corokia macrocarpa* (hokataka, whakataka) laden with large yellow berries, and past drifts of the unique Chatham Island sow thistle *Embergeria grandifolia*, the quarry is finally reached (Fig. 1A–B). Here these handsome plants grow between rocks and a prostrate hebe (*Hebe/Veronica chathamica*) the locals call koromiko, right at the sea's edge.

According to the latest *Threatened Plants of New Zealand* book (de Lange et al., 2010) it is found on the following islands of the Chathams group: Rekohu (Chatham I),

Rangiauria (Pitt Island), Mangere, Little Mangere, Rabbit and Rangatira (South-East) Islands. Its natural habitat includes coastal cliffs, rocky outcrops and rock stacks, sandy and rocky beaches just above the strand zone, and in openings within coastal forest.



Fig. 1 Chatham Island forget-me-nots (*Myosotidium hortensia*) growing in the wild near Kaingaroa. **A**, natural habitat and population. **B**, plant. Photos: Lois Croon.

The Islanders call this plant a lily but in fact it is a member of the borage family. *Myosotidium hortensia* shares its common name with *Myosotis*, the other forget-me-nots of the Boraginaceae. Whereas *Myosotis* is species rich, *Myosotidium* comprises just the one Chatham Island species, and the two genera are not as close as once was thought. Surprisingly, recent DNA sequence evidence has concluded that the closest living relative to *Myosotidium hortensia* is the species *Omphalodes nitida* found far away in the Mediterranean

(Heenan et al., 2010). The conclusion from this molecular work is that the ancestor of *Myosotidium* arrived on the Chathams through extreme long-distance dispersal, sometime between 3.6 and 22.5 million years ago.

Travelling around the main island (Rekohu) it's a fairly common sight tucked in against buildings, along hedge rows and always cultivated with tantalising ease (Fig. 2). At Waitangi, the main settlement, it has been planted on the side of the road and at the rest area just above the hotel where it thrives even among long grass. Lois Croon at her garden at Admiral Farm grows these plants in huge drifts – blue (Fig. 3), pink and some white-flowered forms (Fig. 4). Coastal development destroyed the only white-flowered wild plants and these are now only known in cultivation.



Fig. 2 Chatham Island forget-me-nots thriving in cultivation at Admiral Farm. Photo: Natasha Polyakova.

"They grow like weeds – the rougher it is the better" Lois tells me and goes on to give her recipe for success: "It's a coastal herb; they like a light soil but will perform in a heavier one providing it's not clay. They like wind and to be fed with seaweed, or lots of compost, or a liquid feed. Don't plant them in the shade or love them to death. In summer an occasional drink of water would be appreciated. It's normal for them to die down after flowering".

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Fig. 3 The usual blue flowered form of *Myosotidium hortensia*.
Photo: Natasha Polyakova.

“They form tubers after a time and new plants can spring from these. Here on the Chathams the temperature is normally in the low 20s (°C) so a cool site is needed for them on mainland New Zealand.”

Lois has simple directions on how to grow new plants from seed. “Keep seed moist and sow them fresh; expect them to germinate in 5–6 weeks. As soon as they are large enough, prick the seedlings out into PB2 bags using a good long lasting mix.” Growing plants from seed is more responsible than digging up whole plants from the wild for private use in local gardens.

The drastic decline of this special plant that once grew all over Chatham and Pitt Island is due in part to the introduction of pigs who love eating the tubers they form. Browsing, trampling and rooting by pigs, cattle, sheep, and horses also damages the plants. Possums and rodents are said to browse on their flowers and fruits.

Lois Croon is fascinated by the huge leaves of these special plants. She notes their leaves have



Fig. 4 White-flowered Chatham Island forget-me-not cultivated on Chatham Island. This form is now extinct in the wild.
Photo: Natasha Polyakova.

corrugated channels that help rain water run down to the roots. Lois is also a prominent conservator on the island and in 2008 was one of those instrumental in founding the Chathams Heritage and Restoration Trust, known as CHART, a voluntary local organisation aiming ‘to protect and restore the natural and historic heritage of the Chatham Islands.’ Lois says: “In the very early days the island sand dunes were covered with shrubs, grasses and herbs – including pīngao (*Ficinia spiralis*, formerly *Desmoschoenus spiralis*) and the showy mega-herb, *Myosotidium*. But pigs soon devastated the dune plants allowing erosion to set in. Also, a good deal of the bush was cleared for grazing causing wind erosion. The introduction of exotic marram grass (*Ammophila arenaria*) in 1890 further accentuated the decline of natural habitats.”

One of the Trusts main projects is to protect and restore the endemic flora along the beach front adjacent to the main settlement at Waitangi. Many different trees and shrubs have been established to provide shelter:

Chatham Island akeake (*Olearia traversiorum*), *Corokia macrocarpa*, Chatham Island mahoe (*Melicytus chathamicus*), *Hebe* (*Veronica*) *barkeri* and karamu (*Coprosma chathamica*). The Chathams flax, *Phormium tenax*, is kept at a distance being very vigorous. Marram grass proved difficult to eradicate but after several attempts it died to provide useful mulch. Endemic herbs were then established on the front of the dunes, including Chatham Island forget-me-nots, Chatham Island geranium (*Geranium traversii*) and the robust Chatham Island sow thistle (*Embergeria grandiflora*).

A further project involves fencing a narrow strip of limestone bluffs known as Blind Jims which faces the vast Te Whanga lagoon. CHART hope to reinforce remnants of the Chatham Island kōwhai (*Sophora chathamica*) growing there in addition to planting olearia and other broadleaf trees. It is thought this kōwhai may have been introduced from the mainland and may only be indigenous to the northern half of the North Island. The trust is also heavily involved in restoring the Ngāti Mutunga Ngāti Haumia Pa Reserve where many community members help with planting and maintenance.

References

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