



# Lantana

## *Lantana camara*

*Lantana camara* is a pest plant in Northland and, after 1 July 1996, cannot legally be propagated, sold or distributed.

In New Zealand, the word lantana is applied generally to two species, trailing lantana (*Lantana montevidensis*) and the common lantana shrub (*Lantana camara*). Trailing lantana is a small, non-prickly, low-growing plant with mauve flowers which is popular in rock gardens. It has not yet proved to be invasive. *Lantana camara* is a 2-4m tall smelly shrub represented by many coloured varieties, including pink, red, yellow, orange, mauve, white and bi-coloured. Some of these have escaped from gardens in Northland and are now established as serious weeds of coastal and waste areas, bush edges, exotic forest and pasture. The yellow-pink variety is particularly aggressive.

Most varieties of lantana are poisonous to some degree, the red flowered one especially so. There have been reports of stock deaths in Northland and many cattle have been killed in Australia by lantana. It is also toxic to humans. The symptoms of poisoning include vomiting, severe abdominal pain, bleeding, weakness, fear of light and coma.



### ORIGINS

Lantana is a native plant of tropical South America, now widespread through the Caribbean, Africa, eastern and southern Asia and the Pacific. It is probably the worst weed of Norfolk Island, Fiji, Tonga, the Cook Islands, Niue and Queensland. Lantana is also a significant weed in New South Wales. Over four million hectares in Australia are infested. Introduced into New Zealand as a garden plant around 1890, lantana was established in the wild at Kohukohu and Whangaroa as early as 1895. Since the 1980s, lantana has become an aggressive invader in many parts of upper Northland.



**DESCRIPTION**

*Lantana camara* is a shrub to 4-5m tall, sprawling or scrambling. It has a brown, woody taproot with extensive shallow laterals which sucker when broken. Young stems are four-angled, hairy and prickly while older stems are rounded, woody, much branched and brittle. The leaves are in pairs, very wrinkled, oval, 3-9cm long with toothed margins. They are hairy and veined with a strong pungent smell when crushed.

The conspicuous flower heads are flat, 2-3cm across and consist of many tiny tubular flowers, on show all year round. These are coloured cream, yellow, orange, pink, red, purple or mixtures of these, changing colour as they mature. Small berry-like fruits occur in clusters. These are hard and green, ripening to juicy purple-black and containing one small pale seed per fruit.

**THREAT TO NORTHLAND**

Lantana is aggressive and extremely versatile in its habitat preferences. It likes well drained soils (stony, sandy, loam, volcanic) but also thrives in clay. It prefers high rainfall but once established is very drought resistant. It grows equally well in the open and in shaded areas. It is susceptible to hard frost.

Plants are long-lived and form dense thickets which shade out and exclude other species. Birds (waxeyes, mynahs and others) spread seeds to new sites, eg bush edges, fences and other perches.

Lantana is a production weed of drier pastures, crops, fence lines, quarries, shelter belts and plantation forest. It also threatens conservation values in regenerating bush, offshore



islands, cliffs, gumlands, foreshores and parks. Like pampas and gorse, it is a weed of roadsides and waste areas. Lantana is believed to be allelopathic, ie it releases substances into the soil which inhibit the germination or growth of other plants. This allows thickets to remain long-lived and not be replaced by other species.

One of lantana's greatest threats is to livestock health. The red-flowered form has caused cattle deaths in Northland and other coloured varieties are also suspected to be poisonous. Severe dermatitis and damage to the liver, kidneys and intestines occurs. Constant facial itching may result in serious injury and blindness as the animals rub against posts, trees, etc.

**WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

You may have lantana growing in your garden, where it may appear as an innocent pretty shrub. However, birds can carry seeds to other places, where it can quickly become a serious pest plant. You can play your part in protecting Northland's environment by removing lantana wherever you find it and by not planting any *Lantana camara* varieties.

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