

Plate 445 *Metrosideros excelsa*

Metrosideros excelsa

New Zealand 8th October 1769 – 31st March 1770

Opoorage, New Zealand, 5th November 1769 and Totara nui, New Zealand 15th January – 6th February 1770.



Metrosideros excelsa is a coastal evergreen tree that produces a brilliant display of red flowers and occasionally orange, yellow or white depending on location. The Maori name for the tree is *Pohutukawa*, and it is one of twelve *Metrosideros* species endemic to New Zealand. The generic name *Metrosideros* is derived from the ancient Greek word 'metra' meaning heartwood, and 'sideron' meaning iron. The species name *excelsa* is derived from the Latin 'excelsus' meaning highest or sublime.

The *pohutukawa* can grow up to 25 metres in height with a dome-like canopy and multiple trunks. The tree flowers from November to January with a peak in mid to late December, thus attracting the common name *New Zealand Christmas tree*. The natural range of the *pohutukawa* covers the coastal regions of the north island of New Zealand and northern parts of the South Island. Unfortunately, by the 1990s pastoral farming and introduced pests had brought about a reduction to *pohutukawa* forests by 90%. One of the threats is the common brushtail possum which strips the tree of its leaves. Since 1990, The Project 'Crimson Trust' has been protecting and restoring *pohutukawa* (and its close relative the *rata*) trees and their ecosystems. To date, there are at least 39 cultivars available in various shades of red, orange, pink, yellow, and from 2009, white, in the form *Metrosideros excelsa* 'White Caps' sourced from Piha Beach, Auckland.

The *pohutukawa* tree figures prominently in Maori culture and mythology. A famous legend involves an 800-year-old tree believed to guard the entrance to a sacred cave through which disembodied spirits pass on their way to the next world. Maori people have used *pohutukawa* wood for making various artefacts exploiting the tree's very dense, strong and highly figured features. Shipbuilding has in the past used the naturally curvy shapes to make strong knees. In woodworking a knee is a natural or cut curved piece of wood such as boat ribs. The strength of timber lies in the direction of its grain therefore any significant curve to the hull of a boat requiring ribs creates a knee where the vertical changes into the horizontal. A natural or grown knee offers a very structurally sound form with the grain following the shape of the curve.

The *pohutukawa* tree has become established as part of the New Zealand Christmas tradition featuring on greetings cards and in songs and poetry. In 1833, the missionary Henry Williams described holding a service under a '*wide spreading pohutukawa*'. The first known published reference to the *pohutukawa* appeared in 1857 when '*...flowers of the scarlet pohutukawa or Christmas tree...*' formed part of decorations at a feast put on by the Maori Ngapuhi tribal leader, Eruera Maihi Patuone (c1764-1872 *well over 100 when he died!*). In addition to being a chief, Patuone was regarded as a peacemaker as well as being a NZ government adviser. Several years later the Austrian geologist, Ferdinand von Hochstetter (1829-1884), observed the *pohutukawa* used as Christmas decorations: '*The settler decorates his church and dwellings with the lovely branches*'. During the 19th century the *pohutukawa* was described as the '*settlers Christmas tree*' and '*Antipodean Holly*'.

In 1941 army chaplain Ted Forsman composed a *pohutukawa* carol in which he made reference to '*...your red tufts, our snow...*'. Even today many school children sing about how '*the native Christmas tree of Aotearoa (NZ) fills their hearts with aroha (love)*'. Ted Forsman was born in 1909 in Pakuanga, Manukau City, New Zealand. During WW2 he was a chaplain in the New Zealand Chaplains Department. His carol provided an uplifting emotional link to the home country for his military flock. Post-war, Forsman became a Roman Catholic priest. He died in 1976.

Robert Parkinson

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