



5 - Special Southland Plants: Your Native Garden Starter Pack

New Zealand's native forests are unique. Eighty million years of evolution in isolation from other continents produced a special collection of plants and animals found no-where else in the world.

The native forest remnants that remain are all important refuges for plants and native birds and help to give a New Zealand character to the landscape. Within New Zealand, regions have their own character and Southland is a special place to live. You can plant native plants that tell some of the stories of Southland's and New Zealand's history.

Plants Special to Southland - Moa plants

Mingimingi (*Coprosma propinqua*) and Lancewood (*Pseudopanax crassifolius*)

Lancewood is one of many native trees that look different when they are young to the adult. The leaves of young lancewood are narrow and have sharp teeth. One theory is that the young tree developed tough narrow leaves to prevent browsing by the now extinct giant moa. Once the tree has grown above the height a moa could browse to the leaves change becoming fleshier and nicer to eat!

Many other native shrubs such as mingimingi have evolved to form bushes of wiry, tangly interlacing branches with small leaves. Often the leaves are hidden on the inside of the bush. This meant that the moa could not easily eat the leaves.

Unfortunately when sheep and deer were brought into New Zealand nobody realised the damage these creatures could do with their teeth. Moa did not have any teeth and so just pulled off leaves with their beaks and did less damage to plants. (See also the Southland Native Forest Restoration Factsheet).

Grasslands

Red tussock (*Chionochloa rubra*)

This magnificent flowing red grass was once very common throughout Southland. It would have been a familiar sight on the Southland plains and hill country. Now, it is rarely seen as the fertile ground on which it grew has been converted into green farm land. As a garden plant red tussock looks magnificent when mass planted or when creating wetlands it is in its ideal habitat. It is one of the largest grasses in cultivation growing to a metre high.

Rivers of gold

South Island Kowhai (*Sophora microphylla*)

The kowhai is a well known tree that has bright yellow flowers in spring. The flowers contain a large amount of nectar in the flowers which makes them very popular with native birds, particularly tui and bellbird. Native pigeons eat kowhai leaves. Plant kowhai's to attract native birds into your garden.

Maori used the kowhai to help determine when to plant kumara, i.e. when it flowered in the spring. The wood of the tree was used to make paddles and the head of axes as it was very sturdy. In Southland kowhai's would have been found on the banks of almost every river and stream; that is where they prefer to live. The kowhai is famous for its bright yellow very hard seeds.

Because kowhai lived on riverbanks the seeds would drop into the water and float great distances before settling into sand and growing. To get kowhai seeds to grow you must soak them well in water first.

A Forest Giant

Hall's totara (*Podocarpus hallii*)

Totara is a tall forest tree that can grow for up to 600 years. Some of the most important totara forests in New Zealand can be found in Southland growing on the sand dunes in the Otatara area. Totara is one of the few forest canopy species that can tolerate being planted out in open situations.

The generic name "Podocarpus" means seed with a foot referring to the seed being attached to a red fruit to attract birds. These fruits are a favoured food of the native pigeon. Maori used totara bark for covering houses and shelters and also for the outer covering for bags they kept muttonbirds in to bring them back from the islands.

What is a Southlander?

Southlanders are tough; they can grow in windy, cold, sunny, frosty places where plants from other regions can't survive. Even if the species also grow elsewhere, if they are grown from seed from Southland stock they will survive better. (See 1- Southland Native Plants for Forest & Wetland Restoration, 2- Southland Native Plants for Forest Restoration, 3- Southland Native Shelterbelt Planting and 4- Southland Native Plants for Wetlands factsheets for more information). The plants in this pack tell stories of Southland's natural history. Plant them in your garden and remember why they are important. Southland's natural landscapes are made up of trees, shrubs, herbaceous plants and grasses. This pack includes: cabbage tree; mingimingi; lancewood; red tussock; South Island kowhai, Hall's totara, and *Gunnera*.

As rare as hens teeth!

Gunnera hamiltonii is the rarest plant in New Zealand, and it only grows in Southland. That means there are only 5 plants left in the world and they live on the Southland and Stewart Island coasts. Unlike many New Zealand plants *Gunnera* doesn't have a common name or a Maori name, because it was never common. *Gunnera* creeps over sand dunes, covering quite large areas but those areas are only a single plant. Because of the habitat it grows in, parts of the plants often get washed away by rough seas. The small number and distribution of plants makes it susceptible to threats including weed invasion and modification of the environment.

Southland Community Nursery in Otatara is a voluntary community project where you can pot up your own native plants from locally sourced seedlings for free. Advice is available on native plants and landscaping. Contact Chris and Brian Rance (03) 2131161. The Southland Community Nursery web site is <http://homepages.ihug.co.nz/~rances/>

For free advice on planning and designing your forest restoration programme or about Southland Landcare Groups contact Land Sustainability staff at Environment Southland (03) 211-5115



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Cabbage Tree ~ ti kouka (*Cordyline australis*)

Cabbage trees actually grow throughout New Zealand from Northland to Southland in wet and dry conditions, but the Southland cabbage tree looks different from others around the country. It has adapted to Southland's conditions and has sturdy broad leaves. In Southland cabbage trees did not get attacked by the disease that attacked its northern cousins because the climate is too cold for the insect that caused the damage.

Cabbage trees are particularly useful as a nurse plant when establishing vegetation and are also fire resistant. The name cabbage tree was said to have originated from early settlers eating the young shoots, which they boiled. Captain Cook and his sailors, also ate the shoots to prevent scurvy.

The cabbage tree has had a number of uses including: marking burial grounds; food; medicinal purposes; recreation; use of its fibre; clothing; building; alcohol and is portrayed in different art forms as an iconic piece of New Zealand landscape.

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