

## A MAINLAND POPULATION OF YELLOW-FLOWERED POHUTUKAWA, *METROSIDEROS EXCELSA* VAR. *AUREA*

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Nearly 40 years ago, Elizabeth and I attended the estate sale of the orchid collection of Mr. Charles Reader, a highly respected Auckland hobby orchidist. Orchid plants were scattered over the lawn of his home, but a number of cardboard cartons on the driveway caught my attention. Investigation showed these to be filled with back issues of 'The New Zealand Gardener' magazine. We purchased them all for a modest sum and carted them home. They proved to be an almost complete 30-year run of the magazine, commencing with Volume 1 Number 2 (October 1944). As I read my way through them, I came across an interesting article from the October 1967 issue: 'Reader Experience: Discovering a New Plant', which was written by F.K. Adams.

*A copy of that article appears at the end of this one, reproduced with kind permission from NZ Gardener magazine.*

This 1967 story relates to the discovery of a yellow-flowered pohutukawa tree at Oruaiti Beach, at the eastern end of Waihou Bay. In December 1985 Elizabeth and I were holidaying in the Eastern Bay of Plenty with our young daughter, and we decided to visit this site. The yellow pohutukawa turned out to be more than one tree! With some difficulty I scaled one of them, which was perched on the upper edge of a steep rocky slope, and secured a specimen.

We have not fully visited the site since, but on Friday 19 December 2014 Elizabeth and I were returning from an expedition to the East Cape/northern Poverty Bay area. The afternoon was drawing to a close and we had a lot of miles to cover to get home and to return a work vehicle, but we stopped on the roadside near 'Yellow Pohutukawa Valley' and looked hopefully inland. A yellow pohutukawa was immediately spotted, in near-full bloom. A photograph of it is shown (next page). The tree in front of it, not yet in bloom but with a heavy set of buds, is likely to be red-flowered. Readers of the print version of this newsletter will see this photo in monochrome, but if you want a colour version, email the authors and we will send you the picture file. Alas, the Waiotuma Stream valley, where these trees are found, has been used as a dumping ground for old car bodies etc., so caution is advised when wading through the long grass of the valley bottom. The pohutukawa trees themselves grow on the upper slopes of the valley sides.

Light-yellow-flowered variants of the pohutukawa, *Metrosideros excelsa*, are known and are mildly popular in cultivation. They lack the sheer spectacle of the better crimson-flowered forms, but have their own charm and interest. The majority of the plants in cultivation are believed to originate from the population of yellow-flowered trees on Motiti Island, in the Bay of Plenty (Dawson *et al* 2010). An early mention of the Motiti Island form comes from Georgina Rutherford who visited Motiti Island in 1946 and collected cuttings from an old tree growing on the seaward side of the island. The tenor

of her article is unclear as to how many yellow-flowered trees grew on the island. She struck cuttings but these presumably did not become commercially available (Rutherford 1946). The late Sir Victor Davies, a well-known nurseryman from New Plymouth, also obtained propagating material of this Motiti form, with some delay and difficulty, and eventually, after grafting these scions onto pohutukawa seedling rootstocks, several yellow trees resulted, and the Duncan and Davies nursery sold this variant over several decades from 1947. Interestingly, according to Sir Victor Davies, the yellow form comes true from seed (presumably if self-pollinated), which might explain how several such trees are to be found at Oruaiti (Elliot 1968). Apparently many of the yellow-flowered trees sold by Duncan and Davies Ltd. were seedlings but came true from seed (Dawson et al 2010).

Some breeding for flower colour has been carried out by members of the Jury family, who are well-known plant breeders from Taranaki (Abby Jury, *pers.com.*), and a wide range of flower colours may be seen in New Plymouth (including one that is almost black) and Tongaporutu, North Taranaki – these include plants with flowers in the pink-apricot range. It is interesting to speculate just how this population of pale yellow-flowered *M. excelsa* arose at Oruaiti. Did they arise from a single genetic ‘accident’ at the site, or from wind-blown seed – probably from Motiti Island, although other similar plants have been reported from the Whakatane area (P. Livingstone, Department of Conservation, *pers. comm.*). Or did earlier inhabitants of the Eastern Bay of Plenty deliberately plant them? – the trees have been on the site for quite a long time. Probably we shall never know, but we hope to investigate if opportunity permits.



A yellow-flowered pohutukawa, Oruaiti, Eastern Bay of Plenty, 19 December 2014.  
(Viewed from S.H. 35) Photo: Nick Miller.

## References:

Adams, F.K. 1967. Discovering a New Plant. *N.Z. Gardener* October 1967.

Murray Dawson, Jack Hobbs, Graeme Platt and Jim Rumbal 2010. *Metrosideros* in cultivation: Pöhutukawa. *New Zealand Garden Journal*, Vol. 13(1), pp 10-22.

Douglas Elliot. 1968. Plants associated with Christmas "Down-under". *Journal of the Royal NZ Institute of Horticulture*. New Series Vol. 1 No. 1, pp 33-39.

Georgina Rutherford. 1947. Yellow-flowered Pohutukawa on Motiti Island. *Journal of the Royal NZ Institute of Horticulture*. Vol. 17 No. 2 September. p. 16.

## READER EXPERIENCE

### Discovering A New Plant

(From *New Zealand Gardener*, October 1967, with permission from the publishers of NZG)

A LITTLE over a year ago I took my family for a holiday to Orouaiti Beach, near Waihau Bay in the Bay of Plenty. As anybody who has travelled through this area will know, the rugged coastline abounds in pohutukawas, and Waihau Bay has some very fine specimens. Orouaiti Beach, being the only sandy beach between Te Kaha and Cape Runaway attracts a smattering of the more adventuresome campers each year, and it was here we elected to stay. At Waihau Bay there is a general store run by the Walker family, pakehas in a predominantly Maori community. In fact English as a language runs a poor second anywhere along this coast.

I was in the store one morning and overheard an excited conversation between a group of Maoris, some of which was fortunately in English. I gathered that one of them had seen a new "green" pohutukawa on his way down that morning - no, not the small one on the side of the road, which everybody knew of, and which was hardly ever seen with a bloom on because as soon as one did appear the first person to pass picked it off. No, this was another which was apparently only seen for the first time that morning. I assumed they meant a yellow one, and wondered if it would be any different to the already well known *Metrosideros excelsa* var. *aurea*. I was told that this one was growing high on a bank above the stream which flows beneath the first bridge as you leave Orouaiti Beach for Cape Runaway, and could best be seen from a spot somewhere between the two bridges.

We drove immediately to this stretch of road, and the whole family piled out of the car and eagerly looked back. But in vain! So out came the binoculars and I scanned every tree along the skyline. I was finally rewarded by detecting, high up and well back, a tree which appeared a little different to the others. I should point out that it was well after Christmas and most of the pohutukawas had finished blooming.

We were due to go home in a day or two, so I enlisted the aid of a Maori friend, Joe Puru, who knew the area well through pig-hunting, although he, like all the others, had

never heard of this tree before. We rode through thick blackberry and manuka scrub up a winding track and finally came out on a small plateau. We approached the area we had pin-pointed from below, but hadn't realised how different the bush would look from above, so it was a case of tether the horses and continue the search on foot. All the larger trees which grew from the top of the bluff had to reach well out to get any sun, so our search wasn't easy, but after passing it two or three times we finally spotted on one tree a spray of spent flowers with yellow looking stamens. I climbed out on the main trunk about 50 feet up and was able to pick a spray or two. There was no entire flower, but it was quite evident that this tree, which I estimate to be at least 60 years old, probably very much older, produced yellow or pale lemon flowers.

I am happy to report that I now have two grafted plants of this pohutukawa growing in my garden, but it will be a few years before they flower and can be compared with those already in cultivation. - F. K. Adams.

*Authors' Note. We would be interested to know more about the author of this article, F.K Adams. Presumably he had an interest in botany and plants. Oruaiti is very different 40 years on!*

**OKAREKA MISTLETOE  
RESTORATION PROJECT**

**WEED CONTROL/MISTLETOE HOST  
PLANTING  
WORK DAYS FOR 2016**

“Come and join Rotorua Botanical Society to control weeds threatening mistletoe sites and plant new host trees. Activities will involve hand-pulling, cutting, sawing of vines, climbers and small trees.

**WHEN: SAT 21 MARCH – WEED CONTROL/PLANT RELEASING**

**WHEN: SAT 17 OCTOBER – WEED CONTROL/PLANT RELEASING**

**MEET: CNR SUMMIT AND LOOP RDS (LAKE END) @ 8:45 AM**

**GRADE: MEDIUM-HARD - ACTIVITIES SUITABLE FOR ALL**

**AGES AND ABILITIES WILL BE PROVIDED**

PLEASE CONTACT ORGANISER PAUL CASHMORE 027 650 7264 (mob) OR  
07 349 7432 (WK) TO RSVP. EQUIPMENT TO BRING WILL BE ADVISED