

Early season for rata and pohutukawa in 2020

Graeme Jane

Some of our most spectacular flowering native plants including southern rata (*Metrosideros robusta*) and pohutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsa*) seem to have quite regular and limited seasons, the former flowering from early December, the latter from mid-December. So on a trip from Doubtful Sound to Puysegur Point in early October we were surprised to see fresh rata flowers on the bar of the boat on our first day and were told they came from the fiords. Over the next few days we saw plants in flower at several localities but especially at Richard Henry's former cottage site on Pigeon Island near Resolution Island, and at Astronomer's Point, both in Dusky Sound. Later we also saw plants in flower at Knights Point, SH6 in South Westland.



Southern rata (*Metrosideros robusta*) in Fiordland, October 2020. Photo: G. Jane

When we arrived home at the end of October we began to see scattered pohutukawa in flower around Tauranga and over the next few days also around Auckland and in the Far North at Pukenui, north of Kaitaia, more than a month earlier than expected.

Many garden plants this year seem to be a month or more early flowering. Our spring citrus have ripened 2 months early and flowered equally early in Tauranga. Brush wattle (*Paraserianthes lophantha*) flowered in May instead of July and some orchids have been at least a month early, perhaps because of the very warm winter conditions.

Is this an effect of global warming, an unusual year or just a lack of awareness? This last winter has been especially mild with temperatures in the mid-20° C in Tauranga in July and soils remained quite dry with many streams around Tauranga still at late summer levels in November, in spite of regular (light) rain. Fiordland has also had a mild winter, though Fiordland without rain is an oxymoron. So is this just an odd year or a sign of changes to come?

Additional editors' comment:

We noticed what appeared to be genuine pohutukawa (rather than hybrids with *M. kermadecensis*, or Pacific pohutukawa such as *M. collina* 'Springfire' or *M. collina* 'Tahiti') flowering at Whitianga on the Coromandel Peninsula, in the reserve along the estuary by the town, in early November. The flowering was not heavy, but definite.

The Flora of New Zealand Volume 1 records flowering of southern rata as November to January, and pohutukawa as December to January. However, NZ Plant Conservation network (<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/>) records flowering for southern rata as (October-) November-January (-February), and for pohutukawa as (August-) November-December (-March), so there would seem to have been some outlier records in the past. However, the format suggests that these extremes are unusual.

Elizabeth and Nick Miller