

## Queensland poplar (*Homalanthus populifolius*) – an alert

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*Homalanthus populifolius* is an attractive small tree, tolerant of shade, with distinctive heart-shaped to ovate leaves, greenish, with some darker red markings, frequently reddish in cooler weather, on long red petioles. It belongs to the Euphorbiaceae, and has long racemes, of small male flowers, usually with a few female flowers at the base of the raceme. Fruit are stalked, round, usually glaucous, and may fall beneath the tree, or, according to Lisa Forester (quoted on the NZPCN website [https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/?quick\\_search=homalanthus](https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/?quick_search=homalanthus) ), can be bird-dispersed.

The species naturally occurs from New Guinea, down the east coast of Australia, and is recorded from coastal areas of the North Island of New Zealand, also Nelson and the Christchurch area (<https://avh.chah.org.au/> ). On <https://inaturalist.nz/> (accessed June 2022), records are from the Far North, lowland areas of the North Island west coast, especially urban areas such as Auckland, New Plymouth, Whanganui, Palmerston North, and Nelson and Christchurch. There are Bay of Plenty records from around Tauranga, but so far there are none east of Tauranga or inland. Most iNaturalist records are seedlings, at a guess mostly less than 50 cm tall; almost all are from the last 10 years, with a huge increase since 2019.

Possible look-alikes, with somewhat similar foliage, are *Brachychiton populneus* (kurrajong, also from Australia), which is occasional in parks and gardens in New Zealand, and *Sapium sebiferum* (Chinese tallow), uncommon in New Zealand.

There have been no formal records of Queensland poplar from the Rotorua District. I remember that years ago there was a tree of this species in the bush on the hillside below our house at Okere Falls, and we removed it, having a vague idea that it might be weedy. This summer, at least more than two decades later, I was surprised to see a rash of small seedlings that looked like this species, more than 100 in a small area under tree ferns and shrubs, with a few further away. We have not noticed such seedlings in the past. They were removed (but vouchered!) and there have been a few further clusters of seedlings in the same area.

The original adult plant pre-dates us at the property. A search turned up a couple of larger seedlings elsewhere under the bush, that look as though they germinated in a previous season. It is apparent that a large reservoir of seed was in the soil, and

was stimulated to germinate this summer, possibly by weather conditions (maybe warmth and/or drought?) or some other factor.



A cluster of *Homalanthus populifolius* seedlings under bush at Okere Falls.  
Photo: Elizabeth Miller

The rapid increase in iNaturalist records is either because people are noticing them more frequently, or because there are more of them present. There could be a slow build-up from a small number of cultivated plants, or possibly a slight rise in average temperature or some other parameter is inducing germination of buried seed.

After discovering the many seedlings under our bush, and wondering about possible sources, we looked in possible sites on roadside banks nearby, and saw three adult plants within 500 m of the plants on our property. From their situations, in roadside regenerating scrub, those plants are naturalised, and have been present for some years, possibly decades.

So there is a possibility that Queensland poplar may be present around other urban or rural areas of the Rotorua District, although it may be somewhat frost sensitive.