

IS WANDERING JEW AN UNMITIGATED NUISANCE?

Lucy B. Moore

Members of the Society are concerned about wandering jew (Tradescantia fluminensis) entering the Coatesville Scenic Reserve (ABS News-sheet for March 1983). The undesirable features of such an easily spread and thickly smothering weed are obvious, and poisoning may be the best way to check an advancing invasion. But under some circumstances and in certain places alternatives should be considered.

I am thinking particularly of Kowhai Park, near the centre of the township of Warkworth, where some 3 hectares of modified forest has been a reserve since about 1934. It is treasured partly because of many big old kowhai trees in full view of Highway 1, which forms one long boundary. Mill Stream runs through the reserve and couple of years ago a walking track was opened, running at first parallel to the highway and the stream through mixed bush with tawa and a big totara, then ascending past several fine old matai trees to a dry ridge with kauri and tanekaha; the next section leads downhill to the starting point at the camping ground. Situated in the angle between the main highway and the road to the many beaches between Leigh and Mahurangi East, this camp is fully occupied through most summers and the bush walk will be used increasingly by visitors as well as local people.

Now we come to the wandering jew. It forms the typical knee-deep ground cover over all but the higher driest parts of the bush, challenging the establishment and early growth of seedlings that could help to restore more natural lower tiers of the forest remnant. Nature-lovers walking the track deplore the presence of wandering jew and would like to see it eliminated. Apart from the question whether such an exercise could be successful (and safe for other species), another aspect merits some thought.

Not far from the camping ground but out of sight I have seen remains of an illicit camp-fire. Even well-meaning but momentarily thoughtless people have been known to drop a glowing cigarette butt or match. In a normal summer, but especially in the dry windy one of 1982/3, the floor litter of such an opened-up patch becomes tinder-dry and a serious fire hazard. In contrast, the juicy stems and foliage of wandering jew is much less likely to burn. As a fire-deterrent this weed has its value (as has periwinkle under pines on sites of old homesteads) in the preservation of a reserve containing century-old trees on the doorstep of a built-up area.

Seedlings of karaka and lacebark push through the Tradescantia and tend to shade it out locally since it does not compete well with an over-topping thickly growing tier of shrubby plants. Experiments might well demonstrate that other naturally occurring seedlings can be encouraged by clearing a square metre or so here and there and keeping these seedbeds free of weed until small woody plants get their heads above danger level. They should derive some benefit from the layer of soft organic soil built up and held on steep slopes over the years by the wandering jew.

Here, at least, the best policy might be to recognize that wandering jew has uses in reducing fire risk and as a potential nurse plant, rather than to attempt the daunting task of eradicating it.