

References

- Cheeseman, T.F. 1873. Field Notebook 5 'Plants found in the North Island'. Auckland Museum Library.
- de Lange, P.D., Norton, D., Heenan, P. B., Courtney, S.P., Molloy, B.P.J., Ogle, C.C., Rance, B. D., Johnson, P. N. Hitchmough, R. 2004. Threatened and uncommon plants of *New Zealand Journal of Botany* 42: 45–76
- Taylor, M. 2002. Meanings and origins of botanical names of new Zealand plants. Auckland Botanical Society Bulletin 26.
- Taylor R. S. L., Towers, N.G.H. 1998. Antibacterial constituents of the Nepalese medicinal herb, *Centipeda minima*. *Phytochemistry* 47 (4): 631-634.
- Walsh, N.G. 2001. A revision of *Centipeda* (Asteraceae). *Muelleria* 15: 33-64.
- Wu J.B., Chun Y.T., Ebizuka Y., Sankawa U. 1991. Biologically active constituents of *Centipeda minima*: sesquiterpenes of potential anti-allergy activity. *Chemical Pharmacological Bulletin* (Tokyo). 39(12): 3272-5.

Pie melon (*Curcubita ficifolia*) at Onehunga

Mike Wilcox

Curcubita ficifolia Bouché (Cucurbitaceae) is variously known as pie melon (in New Zealand), fig-leaf gourd, black-seeded squash, Malabar gourd, chila (Portugal), zambo (Ecuador), and chilicayote (Mexico). It is an ancient cultigen originating in central Mexico but of wide occurrence at higher elevations in Central and South America (National Research Council 1980; Siemonsma & Piluek 1994). It is a rampant, scrambling short-lived perennial tendril vine, and grown as a vegetable crop, most commonly in the Ecuador and Colombia, but also in the Philippines.

According to Esler (1988), it first became naturalised (escaping from cultivation) in Auckland in 1981, but it was reportedly grown in New Zealand as a vegetable during the late 1800's (Webb *et al.* 1988). Ewen Cameron (*pers. comm.*) was familiar with it wild in the early 1960s at the bottom of Orakei Road by Tonks Street in Remuera.

The small, immature fruits can be eaten like courgettes or zucchini, and the young leaves and tips can be used as a green vegetable. The mature fruits are large and something like a watermelon in appearance, and are renowned for their good keeping qualities. The flesh is white and the seeds black (unusual in squashes). The usual way for the mature fruits to be used is as jam.

There is a very extensive colony of pie melon at Onehunga, growing on slopes below industrial land on the seaward side of Neilson Street, and extending through to the Onehunga Walkway. It scrambles over banks and climbs into trees such as brush wattle (*Paraserianthes lophantha*). In April 2005 when I examined this population, there were good numbers of very young fruit, middle-sized maturing fruit, and also full-sized mature fruit. Most flowers at this time were male, with bumble bees busy working the pollen. Several maturing fruit had been hollowed out, probably by rats.

With help of the Internet I have found various recipes for making sweet puddings and jams from this cucurbit. Here is a recipe for a jam which can be made with its thread like flesh. This jam is very popular in

Portugal where chila is grown throughout the country and forms the basis for many traditional sweet meats.



Fig. 1. Colony of pie melon (*Curcubita*) at Onehunga.



Fig. 2. Male flower of pie melon, Onehunga.

The older the chila the better it will be. They can keep for several years and when the green colours start fading then they are ready for the pot. Start by cracking the chila - if in doubt throw it on the floor and it will split nicely. You must remove all the spine-like dark bits in the centre by hand in order to avoid breaking the threads. Just boil the chunks after peeling and deseeding it. After it has been boiled remove any seeds that were left over then keep the flesh in plenty of cold water with lemon peel for two or three days. Change the water several times a day to remove the

toxins. Drain very well squeezing it by hand and weigh. Use for each kilo 1.3 kg of sugar. In a preserving pot dissolve the sugar in a minimum of water and add lemon peel and a stick of cinnamon. Bring to hard ball temperature (120° C) and then add the threads. Cook until it reaches small crack stage (138° C). Pot in the usual way. A simpler recipe uses 0.9 kg sugar for each kilo of threads and then made just like ordinary jam adding water just a touch of water to cover the bottom of the saucepan.



Fig. 3. Mature fruit of pie melon, Onehunga.

Another celebrated way of using pie melon is in a sweetmeat called Cheveaux d'Ange. There are various recipes around including the one that is more like a flavoured honey and another that uses sugar. To prepare, cut the flesh into small cubes and simmer them in boiling salted water for about an hour. When they are tender, pour off the water and refresh the cubes with plenty of cold water. Drain them when cold, and place in a large bowl. Now stir them about with a fork, separating the flesh into strands rather like spaghetti squash. (This can now be mixed with mashed potato and baked in an oven with egg and cheese topping.) For the flavoured honey, mix the flesh with its own weight in honey and leave for a day. Then simmer gently for about half an hour, until it is golden in colour, and bottle. This is the famous Cheveaux d'Ange, once highly esteemed in Paris.

References

- Esler, A.E. 1988. *Naturalisation of plants in urban Auckland*. DSIR Publishing, Wellington.
- National Research Council. 1980. *Lost crops of the Incas: little-known plants of the Andes with promise for worldwide cultivation*. National Academy Press, Washington, D. C., USA.
- Phillips, R., Rix, M. 1993. *Vegetables*. Random House, New York.
- Siemonsma, J.S.; Piluek, K. 1994. *Plant Resources of South-East Asia. No. 8. Vegetables*. Prosea, Bogor, Indonesia.
- Webb, C. J.; Sykes, W. R.; Garnock-Jones, P. J. 1988: *Flora of New Zealand. Vol. IV. Naturalised pteridophytes, gymnosperms, dicotyledons*. Botany Division, DSIR, Christchurch.

BioBlitz and a new exotic grass in Auckland: *Eragrostis amabilis*

Ewen K Cameron

This year BioBlitz was held on 12-13 March, 3pm to 3pm, in the Auckland Domain involving about 40 scientists working from a 300 sq. m. marquee laboratory, fitted out with displays, microscopes, and computers, discovering all different kinds of life within a 24 hour period — from birds to bugs, fish to fungi, plants to parasites — that live throughout the Domain. One of the main purposes of BioBlitz is to promote awareness of biodiversity within our city. The first New Zealand BioBlitz was held at St Heliers in April 2004 in the pouring rain, when scientists located over 900 different organisms in Dingle Dell Reserve and over 600 in the grounds of Meadowbank Primary School, Remuera. Both were coordinated by Landcare Research with input from the Auckland Regional Council, Auckland Museum, Department of Conservation and the University of Auckland. The result of BioBlitz-2005 was over 1,600 life forms were identified in the Domain. Auckland Bot Soc'ers played a major part in recording the various forms of plant

life. The most interesting flowering plant found was the *Eragrostis* recorded here.

Two days before the BioBlitz while doing a reconnoitre with Josh Salter; we collected a small grass (AK 289517) between the flagstones of the Cenotaph area which I was unable to match to any of the known weedy Auckland grasses. Rhys Gardner immediately recognised it as Japanese love grass (*Eragrostis amabilis*). To my knowledge there is only one other collection of this grass from New Zealand: main highway of Ellerslie, Auckland, Mar 2002, *A E Wright 12942*, AK 281028 (dups CHR, L). Like five of the nine previous *Eragrostis* species recorded for New Zealand (Edgar & Connor 2000) this single Ellerslie collection appeared to be another one-off transient record. But this second site where it is locally well-established elevates its status from transient to possibly naturalised (time will tell if it's permanently established).