

This is a garden still in the making with new plantings gracing the slopes towards the east end of the property. Wherever one stood in the garden there was always the imposing view of the house and we had the privilege of being invited in to get an overview from the turret and partake in refreshments. Thanks Geoff for opening the house and garden to us and for the informative commentary as we toured around.

Plant of the month

By Allison Knight

Southern Rata, Iron wood, *Metrosideros umbellata*, family Myrtaceae.

A tui sitting among the bright red umbels of a southern rata growing near a coal mine above Blackball on the Bryophyte Workshop made me think of this spectacular summer-flowering plant.

Then I read Lady Barker's account of a magical boating trip to Lake Coleridge in February, 1867. Her description in a letter back to England follows "...appeared a grove of rata trees growing by the water's edge. The rata only grows in the hills and near water; it is a species of broad-leaved myrtle, with a flower exactly like myrtle in character, but of a brilliant deep scarlet colour, and twice as large. When the bowsprit touched the rata-branches, which drooped like a curtain over the water, Mr H_____ sent us gently through the screen of scarlet flowers and glossy green leaves into such a lovely fairy cove!"

The southern rata, *Metrosideros umbellata*, grows from the ground to a tree up to 15 m high, unlike the larger northern rata, *M. robusta*, which usually starts life as an epiphyte, putting down aerial roots which ultimately surround the host tree. Together with the closely related, mainly coastal, pohutukawa, *M. excelsa*, these hard-wooded trees, with their brilliantly coloured flowers often decorating the water's edge, have become a symbol of our southern Christmas.

References

- Lady Barker: Station Life in New Zealand
John. Salmon: The Native Trees of New Zealand

Illustration from
Hugh Wilson:
Wild Plants of Mt Cook National Park

Metrosideros umbellata

