

Butler Point gardens in Northland, giant pohutukawa and another odd dragon-tree

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In February while holidaying in Northland with my wife, we visited the Butler Point Whaling Museum, 230 m across the harbour from the wharf at Mangonui. The Museum is associated with the historic William Butler (1814–75) house and gardens which are located on a private 26 ha property owned by the Ferguson family (Butler Point 2017). The house was built in 1847 and the gardens were first developed at Butler Point in the 1840s and 1850s by William and Eliza Butler, who resided in Butler House. Although little of those original gardens remain today, a few trees planted by the Butlers have survived, including a giant magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) and a grove of planted pohutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsa*) – “the largest “planted” group of pohutukawa recorded (Burstall & Sale 1984: 26). Large natural pohutukawa are also common. One of these has a trunk circumference of 11.9 m (= 3.79 m diameter) and is claimed to be the largest in New Zealand (Fig. 1). Burstall and Sale (1984) rank it as no. 6 of the Great Trees of New Zealand – and claim it is the largest, at least by timber volume. Note – the large pohutukawa tree near the end of Hamilton Road at Awhitu (SW Auckland) that Bot Soc visited on 18 March 2017 (see Aspin 2017: fig. 3) was larger in some dimensions (Table 1). However, the largest pohutukawa in the Awhitu District is at Pollok. The diameter wasn’t measured because it split into seven trunks during a storm in 2007 (Aspin 2008). The famous pohutukawa at Te Araroa, Te Waha-o-Rerekohu, ranked as no. 50 by Burstall and Sale (1984) cannot be directly compared because its 22 branches arise from ground level (Fig. 2). See Table 1 for a comparison of sizes of all of these great trees.

The Butler Point orchards, not visited by us, evidently feature cherimoya, peppino, avocado,

olives, figs, citrus and macadamia nut trees (Butler Point 2017). The gardens have a mix of exotic and natives trees and shrubs, including a fine flowering frangipani tree (*Plumeria rubra*), and there are several tree poppies (*Bocconia frutescens*). When I asked about wild tree poppy seedlings, Terri, our guide, found one and gave it to me. (Now a herbarium specimen: AK 363547). An unfamiliar climbing pepper in the garden had purple flowers and yellow fruit turning white with age (and very hot to the taste!). I later identified it as *Capsicum pubescens*.

The main plant in the garden that caught my eye was an unbranched dragon-tree (*Dracaena draco*) c. 6 m tall with a dbh of 33 cm (Figs. 3, 4). I was surprised to later learn (Jan Ferguson pers. comm.) that it had only been planted in 1984, provenance unknown. It is about half the height of the unbranched Auckland dragon-trees measured by Cameron (2015: table 1), however, the circumference is about the same size as the two skinniest Auckland trees. This perhaps is a reflection of the better growing conditions at the Northland site compared with the two skinnier Auckland trees which were estimated to be possibly planted c. 1898.

Adjacent to the unbranched dragon tree (2.5 m distance) there was a branched dragon-tree with a 1.5 m tall trunk and five leafy heads. It was planted about 2005 and is typical of the numerous dragon-trees planted around Auckland City over the last 2-3 decades. The occurrence of these two very differently formed dragon-trees growing side-by-side at Butler Point suggests that the branching (and lack of branching) is genetic rather than environmental.

Table 1. Dimensions of some of the largest living pohutukawa.

Location	Diameter (m)	Height (m)	Spread (m)	Reference
Butler Point, Mangonui	3.24 (3.79 on current sign at tree)	18.0	36.5	Burstall & Sale 1984
Te Waha-o-Rerekohu, Te Araroa	6.5 at ground level	20.3	40.3	Burstall & Sale 1984
Hamilton Rd, Awhitu	4.7	19.0	53.0	Aspin 2008 (measured 2002)
Pollok, Awhitu	Split trunks	20.2	54 × 56	Aspin 2008 (measured 2008)



Figs. 1–4: **1.** A massive natural pohutukawa on the coastal margin of the Butler Point grounds. The undated sign reads: 11.9 m in circumference. Scale: EKC 1.91 m. Photo: Cheryl Taylor, 1 Feb 2017. **2.** Te Waha-o-Rerekohu pohutukawa and its many branches at Te Araroa. Photo: EKC, 16 Feb 2017. **3 & 4.** The unbranched dragon-tree, 6 m tall, planted in 1984, Butler Point Whaling Museum gardens. Photos: EKC, 1 Feb 2017.

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References

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