



Kawakawa
Macropiper excelsum subsp. *excelsum*

Family Piperaceae



Description

A small densely branched shrub or small tree, growing to six metres tall. The branchlets are jointed and swollen where the leaves are attached. The aromatic fleshy heart-shaped leaves have prominent veining and are a dark green to almost yellow green colour. The leaves are often covered with insect holes mainly caused by the kawakawa looper moth caterpillar (*Cleora scriptaria*). The tiny flowers are in upright catkin-like spikes and occur on separate male & female plants. In summer the female spikes ripen to a deep orange.

The name “Kawakawa” refers to the bitter taste of the leaves.

Habitat

Found in coastal and lowland forests throughout the North Island and the northern half of the South Island.

There are two other offshore island species of macropiper:

Macropiper excelsum psittacorum from the Kermadec Islands is similar to the mainland form but with longer flower spikes and larger thicker leaves that are glossy and deep green.

Macropiper melchior from the Three Kings Island. The most striking of the 3 species, the leaves are very lush and glossy dark green. It prefers a dry shaded situation.

Cultivation

Kawakawa prefers a moist rich & free-draining soil in a semi-shade to shade position. It will tolerate an open windy situation but is frost tender. It can be used under established planting that has started to open out below the canopy.

The seed is a favoured food of many birds in late summer and are dispersed by them.

The orange mash can easily be separated from the heavier black seeds by floating. Sow seeds on top of seed raising mix. The seeds will go through a period of after ripening and may begin to germinate 2 or 3 months after sowing.

Uses

Culinary: Kawakawa leaves can be used to flavour sweet and savoury dishes. The orange fruits from the female trees are sweet and the seeds are peppery. To extract the core from the fruit, pinch them at the top of the berry and pull upwards, they slide up out of the berry quite easily. Dip the orange fruits in chocolate for a sweet treat.

Kawakawa is used in the production of sweet Ti-toki liqueur.

You can purchase ready made kawakawa tea or make your own. Pick 2 or 3 leaves and place in a cup of boiled water. Leave to infuse for a minute or two, then drink. Good with lemongrass and ginger added or sweeten if you wish, try it iced in the summer.

House-hold: Dried and burnt leaves are used as an insect repellent. Was used for treating the inside of dwellings and kumara patches.

Traditional: Maori wear wreaths of kawakawa on the head as a sign of mourning. Host people of a marae wave leaves of kawakawa to welcome guests especially at a tangi.

Medicinal

The fruit, bark and leaves of the kawakawa all have medicinal properties. One of the most important healing herbs used by Maori and still widely used today.

The leaves were chewed or made into an infusion to treat stomach ailments, bladder problems, the fruits were eaten as a diuretic. The leaves are chewed for toothache.

Externally used to heal cuts, boils, bruises, rheumatism, and nettle stings.

Leaves and bark are boiled in water and the resulting infusion used for the treatment of skin problems such as eczema.

Kawakawa's stimulating and rejuvenating properties made a good tonic.

Constituents

Kawakawa contains myrstin, related to eugenol, which is a mild antiseptic and dental pain reliever.

The presence of lignans in the smoke generated from burning kawakawa leaves and stems kills insects.

Research

MAF Biosecurity NZ have been conducting research since 2008 into the decline of Kawakawa. It is an important shrub for our ecology and is used in coastal restoration planting.

Side effects

Do not overindulge as kawakawa has laxative properties and is mildly sedative.

References

www.wikipedia.org; www.teara.govt.nz; <http://web.auckland.ac.nz>; www.terrain.net.nz; www.kiwiherb.co.nz