KAHIKATEA (*DACRYCARPUS DACRYDIOIDES*)

Kahikatea can form dense monotypic stands in wet areas. Photo: Les Molloy, DOC.

The Kahikatea is New Zealand's tallest native tree with an attractive cypress-like form growing to over 60 metres, and it is found all over the country particularly in swampy areas. They grow in Podocarp forests found at low altitude except in the drier east of the South Island. In their undisturbed state these forests are luxuriant and often present a distinctly tropical character, with their dense undergrowth of shrubs, ferns, tree-ferns, lianas and epiphytes. Hardwood species form the canopy, while the tall Podocarps (such as the Kahikatea) soar high above it. These trees, especially Kahikatea, Rimu and Totara, can live to be very old and reach huge dimensions. There are other species of Dacrycarpus from Burma down to New Caledonia and New Guinea.

Kahikatea soar high above other canopy trees. Photo: DOC.

The trunk of a mature Kahikatea tree is often slightly tapered and may have buttresses around the base. In swampy conditions the roots often form outgrowths which project above the ground around the base of the tree.

The sapwood is a creamy-white and heartwood pale to bright yellow. Kahikatea was used by Mäori for carving and for canoes where better timber was not available. It is subject to attack by borer, so was not a useful construction timber until treatment became available. Because it has no odour and does not impart any taste it was used early by European colonial settlers for butter and cheese boxes.

Adult leaves with fruit. The leaves of juvenile and young trees are longer and in two rows.

Kahikatea is close-grained, but because it tends to be rather soft, dents easily, and looks rather muddy with an oiled finish (a friction polish will produce a better finish), it is not highly favoured by woodturners. When the timber has knots or compression figure, however, it can be produce interesting pieces.

Possible health risks: none known.
Density 460 kg/m^3