



Kauri (*Agathis australis*)

Kauri are among the world's mightiest trees, second only to the Redwood in dimensions. It is New Zealand's iconic tree, and giant Kauri once dominated New Zealand's northern regions in forests with a diverse under-story and shrub layers beneath the canopy. "Tane Mahuta" (king of the forest), in the Waipoua Forest is 1500 years old, over 51 metres tall and nearly 5 metres in diameter, and is the largest remaining Kauri in the country, typical of the mature splendour of the past.

Adolescent Kauri trees have straight pole trunks and a distinctive narrow conical crown, but as they mature the trunk thickens and the lower branches are shed, resulting in the clean, straight trunk of the adult Kauri covered in grey bark. Cut Kauri trunk timber is typically a warm honey colour, the close straight grain having a small fleck which gives the timber a glowing quality. Head, stump and branch wood tends to be more resinous with darker browns and interesting fiddleback, quilting and crotch figure.

Māori used Kauri for boat building, carving and housing and its gum for starting fires and chewing (after soaking in water and mixing with puha plant milk). European sailors extracted young Kauri trunks for ships' masts and spars, and the settlers who followed discovered that mature trees yielded sawn timber of incomparable quality for building. The gum, too, was harvested for the manufacture of varnishes. Stumps and logs from trees felled in the 19th and early 20th century remain a valuable source of wood. Kauri logs and stumps are extracted from swamps created by long-past cataclysmic events or ice-age sea level changes. This wood is well-preserved but impregnated with minerals which create colours varying from dark brown to green. Such swamp Kauri may be from 1000 to 60,000 years old.

Woodturners find Kauri good to turn and a good translucent polish can be achieved, but resinous pieces can be difficult to sand and the finished items (especially when made from straight-grained wood) tend to be prone to denting and marking. Head and stump wood can produce spectacular bowls and platters.

Possible health risks: very rarely irritates the nose.
Density 560 kg/m³



This picture of Te Mautā Ngāhere shows how the frequent shedding of bark leaves the Kauri trunk clean while the crown can be loaded with epiphytes. Photo, Catherine Tudhope, DOC.

