



KOWHAI (*SOPHORA MICROPHYLLA* OR *TETRAPTERA*)

There are three species of Kowhai endemic to New Zealand. The most common, and the one most commonly planted domestically, is *Sophora microphylla*. This tree grows along riverbanks, forest margins and open spaces, throughout the North, South and Chatham Islands. *Sophora tetraptera* is the North Island Kowhai, originally found growing from East Cape to the Ruahine ranges and north of Auckland with flowers that are a more golden yellow and slightly larger than *Sophora microphylla*. Another species of Kowhai is *Sophora prostrata*, which tends to grow prostrate (closer to the ground) in a more shrubby form, with leaves and flowers much smaller than those of the other two species. A further 27 *Sophora* species occur throughout the Pacific.

Kowhai are deciduous trees growing to around 12 metres high, and have fairly smooth bark, a weeping form, and delicate foliage with small feathery leaves, covered from spring through to early summer with large, bright, horn-shaped, yellow flowers (sometimes claimed to be New Zealand's national flower). Tui and bellbirds feast on its nectar, and kereru (native pigeons) may eat the flower buds, flowers, and new leaf growth.

The bark from Kowhai was used by Māori for medicinal purposes, and the wood for wood-splitting wedges as Kowhai timber is tough, heavy, dense, strong, hard, and durable. Early Europeans used the wood for house piles, sleepers and fence posts, and also for tools and machinery, and some cabinet work. If not dried slowly, the wood is prone to cracking.

The Kowhai wood's beautiful light to medium yellow-brown colour and grain makes it valued by woodturners. Because of its physical properties it is especially suitable for miniature and fine turning. An oil finish deepens heartwood colour, and gives a lustrous finish.

Possible health risks: none known
Density approximately 870 kg/m³



Kowhai at the forest edge. Photo: M. Gembitsky, DOC

