



PURIRI (*VITEX LUCENS*)

Puriri is also known as New Zealand mahogany, teak, oak or walnut. It is found in the northern North Island, from sea-level to 800 m above sea-level and tends to grow best on fertile or volcanic soils. Puriri grow up to 20 metres high, with a trunk up to 1.5 metres in diameter, sometimes thicker, and a broad spreading crown. The thin bark is usually smooth and light brown in colour, and can also be very flaky.



Puriri is one of the few native trees with large colourful flowers, which are tubular, ranging from fluorescent pink to dark red, rose pink (most common) or sometimes even white with a yellow or pink blush. These flowers, and the resulting hard-cored fleshy fruit, provide food for native birds year-round.

Puriri timber is usually greenish dark-brown, but sometimes nearly black or streaked with yellow. It was often used for implements and structures requiring strength and durability. While Puriri has a cross-grain making it difficult for carving, Māori used it for garden tools and weapons which had a long life, and for hinaki (eel traps) because it was one of the few timbers that would sink. Legend has it that buckshot used to ricochet off Puriri palisades. The Māori used infusions from boiled Puriri leaves to bathe sprains and backache, as a remedy for ulcers, especially under the ear, for sore throats, and to wash the body of the deceased to help preserve it. Puriri trees or groves were often tapu (sacred) through their use as burial sites and Puriri leaves were fashioned into coronets or carried in the hand during a tangi (funeral).

European colonists selectively logged Puriri to provide timber for fence posts, railway sleepers, shipbuilding and house blocks, as it is ground durable without treatment for 50 years or more. Only the best trees were felled, leaving the gnarled Puriri now often found in farm paddocks. Early reports of Puriri describe naturally clear boles of 4.5 to 9 metres and there are still a few trees like that left. Puriri was also favoured for furniture and decorative work such as inlay veneers, as its appearance was "quite equal to the best Italian or American walnut." However, large portions of a log can be unsuitable for finished work due to the finger-sized holes bored in the growing tree by larvae of the Puriri Moth (*Aenetus virescens*).



In forest the trunk may be straight and clean. Photo: Tony Lilleby, DOC.

Only small quantities of Puriri timber are now available, mainly around Auckland and Northland, mostly used for wood-turning although old Puriri fence posts are recycled for garden furniture. The dark swirling figure of some Puriri wood makes it popular for turning. With sharp chisels it cuts and polishes well.

Possible health risks: none known
Density 900 kg/m³

