



TOTARA (*PODOCARPUS TOTARA*)

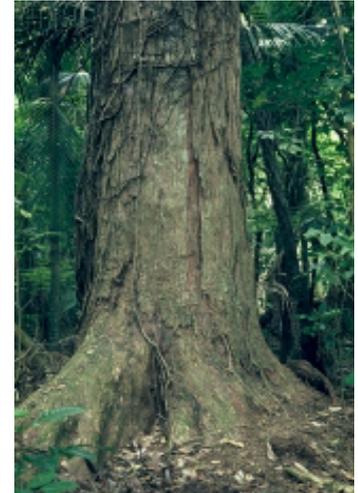
The Totara is a massive Podocarp, softwood tree found throughout New Zealand from North Cape to Bluff and on Stewart Island. It is most abundant in the Central North Island and rare on the drier east coast of the South Island. In their undisturbed state Totara are luxuriant and often present a distinctly tropical character, with their dense undergrowth of shrubs, tree-ferns, lianas and epiphytes. Hardwood species such as Tawa and Kamahi form the canopy, while the tall softwood Podocarps (such as the Totara, Rimu, and Kahikatea) soar high above it.



Typical open-space Totara with short trunk and broad head.

Totara have a thick, fibrous bark and short spiky yew-like leaves. They can live to be very old, and reach huge dimensions, commonly up to 30 metres in height, some reaching 40 metres. Larger Totara are frequently hollow and may be 800 or more years old. One of the largest, near Pureora Forest Park, has a diameter of 3.6 metres, and is estimated to be 1,500 years old.

Totara is extremely durable, usually pinkish in colour and rather plain. The Totara was a special tree to the indigenous Māori of New Zealand, because it splits readily and was easily worked with a stone adze or greenstone carving chisel. It was traditionally used for building and decorative carving. To make a sea-going war canoe (waka), the consecrated tree was hand-felled and the huge logs were hollowed by repeated burning, then hewn to shape with adzes, and the stem and stern posts carved. The resulting canoe was capable of travelling over great distances. Early European usage included fence posts, building piles, exterior joinery, sheathing boats, and roofing shingles.



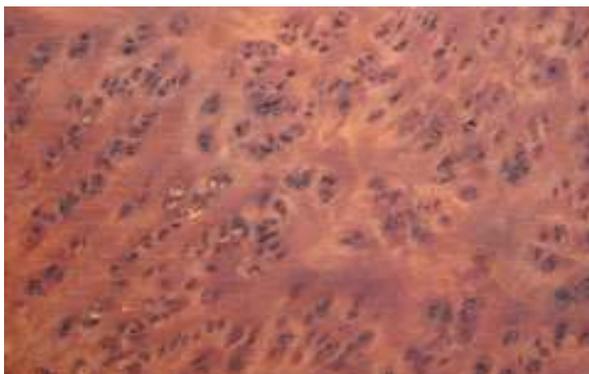
*In the forest Totara is tall and straight.
Photo: Tony Lilleby, DOC.*

While old fence posts make interesting turned pieces, such as vases and decorative items, most Totara is rather plain and is not rewarding to turn. However, Totara burrs or burls (which grow on trunks) have exciting figure patterns. Burr wood is darker than normal trunk wood, resembling much international spotted burr wood. Stump wood and areas where the tree has undergone stress can produce figured and fiddle-back patterns of considerable beauty. Such wood can be used to produce outstanding turned items such as boxes, platters and bowls.



Totara is easy to turn but can be tricky to finish. The oils in Totara react with many finishes leaving a fine "bloom" of salt-like crystals in patches. There are various ways to avoid this. Experiment on scrap wood before applying a final finish as it can take a week or more for the "bloom" to appear.

Possible health risks: none known.
Density 480 kg/m³



Left, Totara burl. Above, normal Totara wood.