

## **Fuchsia excorticata (Tree Fuchsia)**

Tim O'Leary. February 2005

New Zealand can lay claim to having the world's largest fuchsia. Growing in the wild to over 12 metres in height with a trunk diameter of more than 60 centimetres, the tree fuchsia (*Fuchsia excorticata*) or kotukutuku, towers over the exotic fuchsias most people are familiar with. It is positively gargantuan compared with creeping fuchsia (*Fuchsia procumbens*), another New Zealand native and one of the world's smallest.

Central and South America are home to the majority of the 105 fuchsia species with Tahiti having one and New Zealand four. The other two New Zealand fuchsias are *Fuchsia perscandens*, a climber and *Fuchsia colensoi*, a natural hybrid between the tree fuchsia and the climber.

Tree fuchsia grows throughout the country from sea level to 1000 metres and is often found in moist areas along stream banks and on forest margins. It is a tree with an ability to resist fire, and while other trees may succumb, it can form large communities in fire ravaged or regenerating second-growth forests.

Otari-Wilton's Bush is well endowed with tree fuchsia. There are several in the Wild Garden and many others along the streams and gullies of the Circular Walk and forest trails.

As well as its enormous size the tree fuchsia has other unusual characteristics. It is one of the few native trees that are deciduous, and its leaves develop an attractive autumn tint. Shortening days trigger leaf fall in northern hemisphere trees but with the tree fuchsia, leaf fall is related to temperature. This means trees in the colder southern parts of the country lose a lot more leaves than those in the milder north.

Another unusual feature is the growth of flowers directly from its branches and trunk as well as among the leaves. This is a habit of some tropical trees, and one that in the tree fuchsia bears testament to an ancient floral link with warmer latitudes.

It's two forms of flower is another interesting feature. One is a hermaphrodite (the pollen is blue, a very rare colour in any flower) and the other is a female. Both are found on trees growing in the same vicinity but never on the same tree.

Hermaphroditism is believed to be a mechanism that enables plants to successfully colonise on isolated islands (like New Zealand), as they do not need a mate to establish. Later development of female flowers on separate trees ensures cross-pollination and with it genetic variability, a necessity for a species to adapt to changing conditions and survive.

Tree fuchsia has a beautiful form with twisting spreading branches and can be easily recognised by its characteristic gnarled trunk and light brown, peeling, paper-thin bark. The wood is dark brown, hard and durable and has been used in the past for fine inlaid woodwork, wood turning and little else due to its twists and knots, which means, thankfully, it is still reasonably plentiful.

The flowers appear over several months in spring and start with a purple and green tinge before turning a deep red. The fruit is a berry, konini (the name by which the tree is known on the West Coast), dark red and juicy when ripe, its edible (early settlers made a jam from it) and a favourite food of tui.

The seeds germinate freely, its easy to propagate from cuttings, grows reasonably quickly and with its many other attributes well worth considering for the home garden.