

Rhopalostylis sapida (Nikau)

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Photo Credit: Tim O'Leary

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With its easily recognisable form and the character it gives our landscape, the nikau palm is considered an iconic New Zealander.

It's certainly a popular subject in the art world. Giant copper nikau can be seen 'growing' around the Wellington Central Library. Unfortunately, this popularity and abundance does not extend to the natural world. Though not endangered in the wild, nikau has been drastically depleted over the years and it is often overlooked for use in the home garden.

A relative of the date and coconut palm, nikau, *Rhopalostylis sapida* is the only member of the tropical palm family we have in New Zealand, apart from the Kermadec nikau, *Rhopalostylis baueri*, which grows on Raoul Island.

Nikau grows throughout coastal and inland forests of the warmer northern North Island and in milder coastal areas down to Okarito on the West Coast and Akaroa on the East coast of the South Island.

It also grows on the Chatham Islands, where it can lay claim to being the southernmost naturally occurring palm in the world.

Growing to 10 metres in height with a crown of spreading leaves that sheath to form a bulbous base, and a trunk diameter never greater than 25cm, it forms large arrangements of flowers that unfold from the leaf base with masses of pink flowers over summer.

The fruit is the size of a large pea, takes a year to ripen red and is a favourite food of kereru, which disperse the seed.

Nikau was a valuable resource for Maori and early European settlers. Leaves made a very effective waterproof roof and wall thatch for whare, were woven into baskets and floor mats, and the fresh young shoots around the growing tip were cooked and eaten.

No doubt children, down the generations, also used the discarded fronds to sit on and slide down grassy banks, as we did.

In Wellington, nikau grew in what is termed the “Nikau Belt” – an area that comprised semi-coastal forest stretching north from Wilton and Wadestown, through the Western suburbs and parts of the Hutt Valley up to Waikanae.

Unfortunately, only a few large specimens, scattered through the suburbs, and some smaller stands, like those at the Nikau Scenic Reserve on the Kapiti Coast, remain today.

Even in Otari-Wilton’s Bush only a few nikau survive. However, with possum control, fewer rats to eat the seed and increasing numbers of kereru, young seedlings are appearing again in the bush.

Staff have also been busy growing and planting locally sourced material.

Several large nikau can be seen in the Wild Garden and visitors may be inspired to plant more in home gardens and ensure the unique look of our landscape is preserved.

They do best in a rich moist soil, under the shade of other natives and look most impressive when planted in groups.