

Cordyline australis (Cabbage Tree)

Article by Tim O'Leary.

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With their spectacular displays and associated portents of the summer to come, cabbage trees (*Cordyline australis* or ti kouka), never fail to attract admiration and comment.

With hindsight, some might say the poor weather this summer was indicated by the less spectacular flowering displays earlier in the season. However, amounts of flowering are perhaps a better indication of the weather that's been than the weather to come.

I was surprised when a recently planted small cabbage tree produced a large panicle of flowers half its size again. It was so keen to put on a display, it did so almost to its own detriment, putting energy into flower and seed production rather than leaf and root growth.

There are about 15 species of *Cordyline* growing throughout South-east Asia, with *C. australis* and four other species, *C. indivisa*, *C. banksii*, *C. kaspar*, and *C. pumilio*, endemic to New Zealand.

Found on forest margins, open land and near swamps, ti kouka can grow to more than 12m tall with a trunk up to 1.5m in diameter.

When it comes to plant families, botanists have never been able to make up their minds just where it belongs. For many years it was known as one of the tallest lilies and more recently has been moved from the Agavaceae into the Laxmanniaceae family.

Since the late 1980s, ti kouka has suffered from 'sudden decline', a disease that causes sudden yellowing of the leaves and death. It is believed to be caused by a microscopic pathogen that is transferred from tree to tree by the sap-sucking Australian passion vine planthopper.

Today, thankfully, 'sudden decline' is not as prevalent as it was and even some infected trees are recovering. However, over the years populations of ti kouka have reduced dramatically as their habitat has been affected by development.

With its distinctive form, it is probably the best known and most easily recognisable of all our native plants, and deserving of more protection and greater use in our landscape. Planting ti kouka in the home garden is an ideal way to help in this regard.

It makes an excellent tub plant for the patio but, for effect, ti kouka looks best in groups. Even where space is limited, a group of three does not take up much room. Plant them toward the back of borders if there is a worry that the falling leaves and lawn mowers are not compatible.