

Otari Collections: Taupata (*Coprosma repens*)

Taupata (*Coprosma repens*) is a regular around Wellington's beaches, where its characteristic wind-sculptured form can be seen spread out low across the rocks, or crouched down on the lee side of a rocky outcrop, hiding from the blast.

Coprosma species are found throughout the Pacific, with about 45 different species occurring in New Zealand. The title *Coprosma* is an amalgam of two old Greek words: *kopros*, meaning dung and *osme*, meaning smell.

The genus was so named because of an unpleasant odour arising from the leaves of some species (such as *Coprosma foetidissima*) when crushed. Taupata's specific name, *repens*, refers to creeping, so poor old taupata ended up with a scientific name that translates as "creeping dung smell".

The species extends along the beaches and in coastal forests throughout the North Island and the top of the South Island.

Taupata has thick oval-shaped leaves with an almost plastic feel to them. They are shiny deep green on the upper surface (hence the common name mirror plant) and matt cream/green on the underside. At the beach, the leaves are often partly rolled up to decrease their surface area, which helps avoid moisture loss from the wind.

The thick, glossy green leaves and the plant's tolerance to a hammering are what make it great for the garden as well as the coastline. The leaves give a lush green backdrop to other plants while, at the same time, can provide hedging and shelter from coastal winds.

Taupata can grow in a variety of conditions, but does best in a sunny spot, in a loose, sandy soil. In the garden, where conditions are a little less harsh than the beach, the leaves grow broader and flatter, and taupata can be easily grown and pruned to a hedge of 1-2m tall. If left to grow in a sheltered place, old granddad and grandma taupata plants can get to around 8m tall. Compared to the almost prostrate taupata with rolled leaves hugging rocks on the coast, this shows just how much impact the elements have on these plants.

Aside from glossy green, many coloured cultivars have been bred by nurseries in New Zealand and are readily available. *Coprosma* "Marble Queen" is a classy green and white variety on display at Otari-Wilton's Bush in the Cultivar Border next to the Cockayne Lawn. The original *Coprosma repens* is found here also, both in the *Coprosma* species border and growing wild along the sunnier forest margins.

Taupata plants are boys or girls (dioecious), rather than having flowers of both sexes on the same plant. Clusters of attractive bright orange berries appear on female plants in the warmer months. Taupata flowers are pollinated by the wind, so they are small and rather inconspicuous, having no need to attract any insect or bird as a pollinator.

I can easily get over the name; crushed taupata leaves are by no means offensive to the nose. For me, taupata provides our coast with great wind-swept character. Its wonderful crouching forms show impressive determination on the weather-beaten, salt-sprayed coastline it calls home. Look out for it next time you're at the beach.

(Rewi Elliot - Manager, Otari-Wilton's Bush)