

A second look

Part two in a series looking at regional variations in native plantlife. Philip Smith takes another look around his own backyard – Auckland.

Words and photographs by Philip Smith

“All the rest of the city is invisible. Phyllis is a space in which routes are drawn between points suspended in the void: the shortest way to reach that certain merchant’s tent, avoiding that certain creditor’s window... Many are the cities like Phyllis, which elude the gaze of all, except the man who catches them by surprise.”

Invisible Cities, Italo Calvino

The passage above alludes to the way in which we can become consumed with the quotidian rhythms of our cities, to the extent that we fail to see the beautiful and distinctive features that make a place special. I have often been reminded of this as I’ve discovered surprises around Auckland, in places that I hitherto considered to be unremarkable.

It pays to take a second look at the places in which we live (to try and “catch them by surprise”, as Calvino’s narrator, Marco Polo, says), especially in a city such as Auckland, where dialogue about urban sprawl or traffic issues more readily beckons our attentions.

Revelations may take the form of small details in unexpected places, such as the occurrence of robust, tussock-like clumps of *Dianella* (most likely *D. latissima*) on the comparatively sparse headland of Point Chevalier, or the enduring presence of a rare variety of kanuka (*K. ericoides* var. *linearis*) at the northern foot of the Harbour Bridge. Alternatively, it applies to deeper investigation of the more well-known landscapes that stand at the city’s horizons (such as the Waitakere Ranges, West Coast beaches and Gulf Islands), that contain a surprising diversity of ecologies and species (many of which are yet to register with the landscape industry).

With regards to the latter category, the abrupt change in topography and geology at the point where Auckland’s West Coast meets the Tasman Sea hosts a range of interesting species. Some of the impressive cliffs that rise sharply for so much of the coastline are adorned in springtime with the flowers of *Sophora fulvida* (a kowhai that achieves its greatest abundance in the Waitakeres), followed by the white sprays of the attractive climber, *Parsonsia capsularis* var. *grandiflora* (a form that is native to the northern-half



01: *Astelia trinervia*. 02: *Parahebe jovellanooides*. 03: *Griselinia lucida*. 04: *Ackama rosaeifolia*. 05: *Parahebe jovellanooides*. 06: *Parsonsia grandiflora* flowers.



of the North Island). A beautiful, nationally endangered forget-me-not, *Myosotis petiolata* var. *pansa*, also endures at a number of sites along this coastal fringe, where its attractive white flowers appear in summer.

If we cast our gaze in the opposite direction, the Gulf islands serve as a fascinating repository of species that were formerly more common on the coastal fringe of the mainland, such as the glossy-leaved tawapou (*Planchonella costata*) and the vibrant, light green ewekuri, *Streblus banksii*. Both of these species have been used to a minor extent (especially within public plantings), but are deserving of much wider use by landscape architects. Amongst many potential examples from the Gulf islands, two other plants that have proven their worth as landscape plants are *Pimelea urvilleana* ssp. *nesica* (an outstanding groundcover) and *Hebe pubescens* ssp. *sejuncta* (a particularly good variety of Hebe that is commonly sold as *H. 'Mokohinau'*).

Woodhill Forest is an interesting corner of the region, where *Pseudopanax ferox* (which is naturally rare in the wild) can be found, as well as an especially attractive and useful form of the weeping mapau, *Myrsine divaricata*. Meanwhile, just to the east, near Riverhead, one of the most significant botanical discoveries of recent years, *Parahebe jovellanooides* hangs on in the only patch of forest in which it has ever been found. Discovered in 2007, this pretty, little herb is an apt point on which to end this account of some of Auckland’s plants – as an example of the kind of surprises that this densely settled region’s varied landscapes have to offer. ①



AUCKLAND'S FLORA

NAME	Height (m)	WIDTH (m)	GROWTH FORM	NOTES
<i>Alseuosmia macrophylla</i>	1.2	0.8	Shrub	Beautifully scented flowers; understory plant in Auckland's forests
<i>Asplenium haurakiense</i>	0.4	0.6	Ground fern	Named for the Hauraki Gulf Islands, where it grows on dry ground
<i>Astelia banksii</i>	1.6	2	Tussock	Widely-used, attractive landscape species; characteristic of Auckland coast
<i>Astelia trinervia</i>	2	2.5	Tussock	Kauri grass; forms majestic understory to kauri forest, often en masse
<i>Austrostipa stipoides</i>	0.7	0.6	Grass	Distinctive flame shape & tawny colour; occurs on rocky coastline
<i>Blechnum triangularifolium</i>	0.7	1	Ground fern	Green Bay kiokio occurs elsewhere, but is named for area in Auckland's west
<i>Carex "raotest"</i>	0.5	0.8	Sedge	Orange-tinted sedge that outperforms <i>C. testacea</i> ; occurs on West Coast
<i>Celmisia major</i> var. <i>major</i>	0.3	0.25	Herb	Beautiful "mountain daisy" species that is only found in Auckland region
<i>Coprosma crassifolia</i>	2.5	2	Shrub / tree	Can grow as tight coastal hummocks or as a spreading small tree
<i>Coprosma lucida</i>	2	1.4	Shrub	Rather plain, but actually very elegant, shrub; great for medium structure
<i>Doodia australis</i>	0.35	0.5	Ground fern	Reddish new growth; this easily-grown fern is a feature of the lavafields
<i>Dracophyllum sinclairii</i>	2	1	Shrub	The easiest of this desirable group of plants to grow in the north
<i>Dysoxylum spectabile</i>	10	10	Tree	Distinctive tree with a tropical appearance; good landscape plant
<i>Griselinia lucida</i>	3	3	Small tree	Grows as an epiphyte, and is common on lavafields (notably Rangitoto)
<i>Hebe bishopiana</i>	0.5	1	Shrub	Sprawling shrub of rocky ground; needs sufficient air movement
<i>Hebe obtusata</i>	0.6	1.2	Shrub	Attractive Hebe for exposed spots; particularly coastal sites; mauve flowers
<i>Hoheria populnea</i>	4	2.4	Tree	Small, fast-growing tree with beautiful white flowers; often short-lived
<i>Libocedrus plumosa</i>	12	6	Tree	Majestic native "cedar" that deserves to be more widely grown; great bark
<i>Lobelia</i> (syn. <i>Pratia</i>) - 'Woodhill'	0.03	0.7	Groundcover	Spreading groundcover with white flowers; rare; not yet officially described
<i>Meliccytus macrophyllus</i>	3	2	Shrub / tree	Large-leaved mahoe; scented flowers; comparatively compact habit
<i>Metrosideros carminea</i>	4	2	Climbing shrub	Formerly noted from Auckland's lavafield forests; endures in Waitakeres
<i>Metrosideros excelsa</i>	12	16	Tree	Characteristic tree of Auckland's natural and planted coastline
<i>Microlaena stipoides</i>	0.2	0.3	Turf grass	Forms native lawns in many of Auckland's volcanic areas, and coastline
<i>Microsorium pustulatum</i>	0.4	1	Ground fern	Forms impressive swathes on lavafields; also grows in centre of city
<i>Myosotis petiolata</i> var. <i>pansa</i>	0.25	0.4	Herb	Endangered forget-me-not from west coast; best with good air movement
<i>Myrsine divaricata</i>	4	2	Shrub / tree	The northern form of weeping mapau is distinct from southern forms
<i>Olearia albidia</i>	4	4	Small tree	Light green foliage and white flowers; the pale bark is another attraction
<i>Parahebe</i> (syn. <i>Veronica</i>) <i>jovellanoides</i>	0.15	0.5	Herb	Pretty, pale pink flowers; recently-discovered herb from near Riverhead
<i>Parsonsia capsularis</i> var. <i>grandiflora</i>	3	1.6	Climber	Vibrant green foliage and scented, white flowers; occurs on West Coast
<i>Pellaea falcata</i>	0.4	0.6	Ground fern	An attractive fern which was previously common in Auckland's lavafields
<i>Pimelea urvilleana</i> ssp. <i>nesica</i>	0.1	1	Groundcover	Greyish foliage and white flowers; an excellent performer
<i>Pittosporum ellipticum</i>	4	2	Small tree	From open forest & stream sides; for well-drained soils; can be tricky
<i>Planchonella costata</i>	15	8	Tree	Very attractive tree; formerly more common on Auckland's coast
<i>Pseudopanax lessonii</i>	5	2.5	Shrub / tree	A very good landscape plant with a cheerful shade of green; typical of coast
<i>Sophora chathamica</i>	8	10	Tree	In much of the Auckland region, this leafy species is the predominant kowhai
<i>Sophora fulvida</i>	5	7	Small tree	The Waitakeres are the main stronghold for this uncommon northern species
<i>Streblus banksii</i>	12	10	Tree	Very attractive tree with a somewhat weeping form and light green leaves