

Golden glow

To defy the threats of hybridisation, and therefore a lack of distinction between kowhai variants, Philip Smith moots a modicum of parochialism when it comes to plant selection.

Words by Philip Smith Photographs by Philip Smith and Geoff Davidson

Large, bright flowers are effectively 80 per cent signal and 20 per cent sex. The colours and forms that people find so attractive fulfil a role as markers, to rouse the attention of the animals that pollinate many flowers. As spring takes over from the New Zealand winter, several of our kowhai broadcast their own vibrant signals to native birds and insects, announcing that their nectaries are open for business.

It is now a full decade since botanists clarified the relationships between our kowhai, increasing the number of species within the flora from the three that were traditionally recognised, to eight species. However, knowledge of this is still patchy among gardeners and landscapers – hence the motivation for this planting guide.

Why is it important to know these differences? Because plant material is being moved around the country for revegetation projects and smaller scale plantings, thereby bringing well-marked species into contact with each other. Now, I'm no fan of zealous adherence to eco-sourcing in many situations, but kowhai is a legitimate case in which hybridisation (caused by cultivation) does represent a threat. The other reason is that these are distinct plants that, accordingly, offer differing opportunities for landscapers.

For example, within the Auckland region, the subdued leaf colour, spreading form and tightly packed leaflets of *Sophora fulvida* provides a very different look from *S. chathamica* and *S. microphylla* (two other locally occurring species). Furthermore, a little extra knowledge can inform us that *S. chathamica* lacks the tangled juvenile phase that *S. microphylla* exhibits (as well as normally flowering earlier in the lifecycle of individual plants).

Moving further south, the popular *Sophora tetraptera* is found in eastern parts of the North Island. This species is widely planted by gardeners and landscapers, due to its large leaves and the absence of a juvenile divaricating stage. *Sophora godleyi* is associated with particular stone substrates from the Central North Island to the Manawatu, where it can



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develop into magnificent specimens – some of the best flowering displays for kowhai are found in forests in this stretch of the country.

The rocky Wellington coastline (including islands of Cook Strait) is the home of the compact species *Sophora molloyi*. This shrubby kowhai, which has historically been sold as *S. 'Dragon's Gold'* is notable for producing flowers sporadically over much of the year. On the other side of Cook Strait, the distinctive geology of Nelson has evidently played a major hand in the evolution of *Sophora longicarinata*. This species, which grows to be a small tree or a suckering shrub, occurs on limestone or marble in that botanically wondrous province. It has a delicate appearance, due to the long ranks of small, widely-spaced leaflets and the fresh green hue of the foliage.

Rounding off the presence of *Sophora* in New Zealand is the divaricate shrub *S. prostrata*, which is found on the dry eastern flank of the South Island. This intriguing species can grow to more than 2m, although it is frequently flattened by the challenging conditions that it must endure within nature, especially the persistent influence of wind. The only other *Sophora* to be found naturally south of Nelson is the widespread *Sophora microphylla*. This often grows in relatively close proximity to *S. prostrata*, with which it can form interesting hybrids in the wild.

It is necessary to note here that it does not behove landscapers to possess in-depth botanical knowledge of our native *Sophora spp.*, even though it is beneficial. That is part of the role of specialist nursery people.

What we should endeavour towards as an industry is simply to ask nurseries for our own regional variants – plants that carry the accumulated intelligence of millennia spent in their respective environments. ①

01: *Sophora prostrata* in flower. 02: Probable hybrid. 03: Variety of leaf forms exhibited within *Sophora*. 04: *Sophora fulvida*.



KOWHAI SPECIES

Name	Height (M)	Width (M)	Flower (MONTHS)	Notes
<i>Sophora chathamica</i>	12	12	Oct-Dec	Very fine species that should be actively identified and selected by nurseries in the north of New Zealand. Its large leaves give it a comparatively 'substantial' appearance. Native to the upper North Island (from Waikato north); also occurs in Wellington and Chatham Islands.
<i>Sophora fulvida</i>	7	7	Sep-Nov	Beautiful brownish colouration of stems underlies the greyish-green leaves; this species is particularly associated with rocky habitats of volcanic origin. Native to the coast from near Raglan northwards; mostly in the west.
<i>Sophora godleyi</i>	15	15	Oct-Dec	Lovely tree that commemorates Eric Godley, one of New Zealand's great botanical figures of the 20th Century; particularly associated with mudstones and sandstones. Native to the central North Island from just west of Taupo to the Manawatu
<i>Sophora longicarinata</i>	4	6	Oct-Jan	Finely dissected leaves give this species a refined, 'ethereal' appearance. Native to Nelson and western Marlborough
<i>Sophora microphylla</i>	15	15	Aug-Nov	Less common in the north; this is the most suitable candidate for exposed, cold areas. Native throughout the North and South Islands.
<i>Sophora molloyi</i>	4	6	Apr-Oct	Commonly cultivated; dense canopy of leaves and sporadic flowers over winter. Native to the Wellington coastline and Cook Strait islands
<i>Sophora prostrata</i>	2.5	3	Oct-Nov	Tangled growth form; distinctive plant with orangish branches and burnt orange flowers. Versatile landscape plant that should be used more. Can be as small as 30cm. Native to the eastern South Island, from Marlborough to north Otago
<i>Sophora tetraptera</i>	10	8	Oct-Dec	Commonly-planted species; impressive appearance (often underperforms in far north). Native from the eastern flank of the North Island (from East Cape to the Wairarapa) inland to the Lake Taupo and southern parts of the Waikato River.