

Corynocarpus laevigatus

KARAKA NUT is an evergreen tree. Native to New Zealand it has tiny, greenish-cream flowers.

It is also known as *Karaka* (Maori), *Karakapuu* (Finnish), and New Zealand laurel.

Warning – the raw kernels (seeds) are extremely poisonous and can cause convulsions and paralysis.

Laevigatus is derived from Latin *levis* (smooth) meaning ‘smooth or polished’ with reference to the leaves.

Maori legend tells how they brought the karaka nut with them when they emigrated to New Zealand from their Hawaiki home (known now to be in the Polynesian islands) and there appear to be some botanists who still give some credence to this tale. But more often today other botanists point out that two similar, individual species exist which were called by the same common name – one in New Zealand and one in Polynesia. For these latter botanists the tree was more likely to have been distributed naturally when New Zealand (and Polynesia) was attached to the land mass. When (aeons after Gondwanaland broke into smaller segments) the Maoris landed in their new Country and christened the New Zealand tree *karaka* these latter botanists would contend that it was because it not only looked exactly like the one left in their homeland but that it was the same species.

The trees are a familiar sight around old Maori settlements. Maoris wear a circlet of the leaves on their heads when they visit their ancestors’ graves on special occasions. The tree trunks were used to make canoes, and the fruit formed a staple part of their diet – the second most important item.

Fruit flesh can be eaten raw, but the poisonous seeds (kernels) need very careful processing. Although the precise details of this preparation appear to be hazy, the results of an error are not. It seems that very young children were most at risk (no doubt attracted by the colourful damson-shaped orange berries) and the treatment for any that swallowed the fruit was rigorous. They were gagged, wrapped in mats and buried up to the neck so that the limbs were held in a straitjacket. Thus confined the unfortunate patient had water forced down the throat. After being released, a steam bath followed, together with gruel (made from karaka nut and water). The whole exercise must have been horrific – but no more so perhaps than the life for those who were not cured by the treatment. Apparently some authorities report sightings of the occasional child for whom this remedy had not worked and who, although displaying remarkable happiness and good humour, had such contorted limbs that little or no movement was possible.

The following description gives an indication of the imprecision of the different reports on how the seeds are prepared. After the flesh has been eaten or removed, the kernels are collected into baskets. Some suggest that these are then immersed in a boiling spring for about 18 hours after which they are carefully rinsed for immediate consumption. Others tell how baskets of nuts are baked or steamed in earth ovens for periods ranging from 1 hour to as much as ten days. This process is supposed to have neutralized the poison too. The nuts are then cleaned to remove any remaining flesh or skin – either by being trodden on in running water or by being left in baskets to soak in a lagoon or a running stream for anything from one day to several weeks. And finally these seeds are dried and

stored in fresh baskets for several years – after which they have to be steamed before being eaten. It would certainly seem that the nuts were considered to be a desirable delicacy not only because of the undoubted effort required to process them (by whatever method) but also as they were offered as special gifts to a favoured chief, or eaten on feast days.