

Phormium cookianum

[Synonyms : *Phormium colensoi*, *Phormium hookeri*]

MOUNTAIN FLAX is an evergreen perennial. Native to New Zealand and Norfolk Island it has waxy, greenish-yellow flowers that are orange-yellow tinged outside.

It is also known as Lesser New Zealand flax, and *Wharariki* (Maori)..

The flowers are pollinated by birds.

Cookianum commemorates an English explorer, navigator and cartographer, Captain James Cook (1728-1779). In 1746 he was apprenticed to a local Quaker shipowner plying coal in the North Sea and the Baltic then in 1755 he joined the Royal Navy. During his first nine years he served in the Seven Years' War, surveyed the St. Lawrence River and then charted Newfoundland and Nova Scotia coastlines in North America. His first of two world circumnavigations began with the flat-bottomed HMBark *Endeavour* in August 1768 when he led a scientific expedition, via Cape Horn and west across the Pacific, reaching Tahiti in April 1769, to measure the passage of Venus crossing the sun and, in sealed orders opened after Tahiti, to find a legendary southern continent of significant economic value which could be claimed for Britain. On board with him were artists, an English astronomer, Charles Green (1735-1771) and botanists, including the Englishman, Joseph Banks (1744-1820) and the Swede, Daniel Carlsson Solander (1736-1782). After Tahiti he re-discovered New Zealand in October 1769, first found in 1642 by the Dutch explorer, Abel Tasman (1603-1659), and Cook charted her coastline. He then sailed on to Australia's eastern coast (including the Great Barrier Reef on part of which he would run aground and need 7 weeks for repairs), which he also charted and he claimed for his Country before returning home, via Java (now part of Indonesia), the Indian Ocean and the Cape of Good Hope, reaching England in July 1771. In 1772 Cook set out on his second global circumnavigation on HMS *Resolution* (again with artists and scientists on board), accompanied by HMS *Adventure*, to find the still elusive and legendary southern continent. He sailed to the Cape of Good Hope and then south crossing the Antarctic Circle in January 1773 after which the two ships lost contact in fog. HMS *Adventure* returned to England via New Zealand, then sailing east to be the first vessel to perform an east-west circumnavigation. Meanwhile Cook continued his search for that southern continent, thus becoming the first Antarctic explorer and just missing the Antarctic mainland when he turned back towards Tahiti to replenish supplies. After further fruitless searches he explored the South Pacific, surveying as he progressed, moving east to Tierra del Fuego where he again turned south for a third time without any more success. Eventually he sailed north through the Atlantic to England, reaching home in 1774. Although he had located no new continent in the temperate South Pacific he suspected the existence of the Antarctic continent. His last voyage, from which he would not return, began again on HMS *Resolution* (with scientists on board) in 1776. He met up with HMS *Discovery* at the Cape of Good Hope from where they aimed for Tahiti, discovered Christmas Island and, in January 1778, the Sandwich Islands (so named by Cook but now familiar as Hawaii). They then explored the western North American coast (charting the coastline from California to the Bering Strait). On 14th February 1779 Cook died in Hawaii, on their return journey, during a clash with local Polynesians and the vessels

returned to England having discovered no Northwest Passage east through the Bering Strait. Cook was a Fellow of The Royal Society and was awarded the Society's Copley Medal.

The Maoris collected the nectar (resembling sweet water) from mountain flax – as also that from New Zealand flax (*Phormium tenax*) – and drank it alone or used it to sweeten dishes.

Today mountain flax is cultivated as an ornamental plant.