

Phormium tenax

NEW ZEALAND-FLAX is an evergreen perennial lily. Native to New Zealand it has small bronzy-red or yellow flowers containing sweet nectar.

It is also known as Bush flax, Flax, Flax bush, Flax lily, *Harakeke* (Maori), *Lanovník novozélandský* (Slovak), *Lenovník novozélandský* (Czech), *Neuseeländer Flachs* (German), *Neuseelandflachs* (German), *Neuseeländische Flachslilie* (German), *Neuseeländischer Flachs* (German), New Zealand hemp, *Rauhuia* (Maori), and Swamp flax.

The plant was pollinated by parrots before the relatively recent introduction of the honey-bee to New Zealand from Europe.

Warning – the roots are poisonous. They can cause extreme purging.

Tenax means ‘tough, strong, rough or matted’ with reference to the leaf fibres.

Still processed today by craftsmen and some Maori groups the leaf fibres have been used by the Maoris for centuries to make cloth and paper. Apparently it bears some of the toughest known leaves which it is believed few if any men would be able to tear horizontally with their bare hands. The very fine cloth that was much admired by the English navigator, James Cook (1728-1779), was one of several qualities that the Maoris produced from this leaf fibre. The arrival of European settlers led to its further exploitation. By 1830 a valuable fibre exporting industry was so well established that much was being sent to Britain a long voyage away in the northern hemisphere, let alone to other markets. This trade lasted into the middle of the 20th Century when the fibre was gradually replaced by synthetic alternatives.

The Maoris have collected the nectar from the flowers for centuries. The children picked the flowers and tapped the nectar into gourds. Whether records of the quantity harvested from one plant can be relied upon is uncertain but some say half a pint, others a pint – and if thought about either amount must appear remarkable to the layman. The nectar was not only used as a sweetener but when mixed with water it also made what is said to be a ‘refreshing’ drink – one of the few taken by the Maori apart from water.

The tasteless gum at the base of the leaves was used by the Maoris as a medicine. It was chewed to ease diarrhoea. [When settlers arrived in New Zealand they also used the gum but as an adhesive for postage stamps.] Even today abscesses are sometimes treated locally with a pulp made by roasting and steeping the roots.

Although Sir Joseph Banks (1744-1820), the celebrated English botanist who had accompanied Cook, took seeds back to England in 1771 it was not until a second supply was introduced there in 1789 that they were successfully cultivated. Then from England New Zealand-flax was introduced to other parts of the world.

Today the leaf fibre is still used for making floor coverings, upholstery materials, carpet underfelts and furniture padding, as well as for binder twine, ropes, cordage and paper (the latter produced by machine in continuous rolls).