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*Rhopalostylis sapida*

[Synonyms : *Areca banksii*, *Areca sapida*, *Eora sapida*, *Kentia sapida*]

**NIKAU PALM** (English, Swedish) is a palm. Native to New Zealand, it has shuttlecock arrangement of feathery leaves and from trunk, long clusters of showy, purple or pinkish-white fading to cream flowers framed by two leaf-like spathes followed by brilliant deep red to orange berries.

It is also known as Feather duster palm, New Zealand Nikau, Nikau, *Nikaupalmu* (Finnish), *Palmier blaireau* (French), *Palmier de Nikau* (French), Shaving brush palm, and Shuttlecock palm.

The young palm is understood to be stemless for its first 40-50 years and becomes a mature palm when 150-350 years old.

These palms withstand the ravages of bush fires.

*Sapida* is derived from Latin *sapio* (to taste, have a flavour) meaning ‘pleasant tasting’.

Not only is this the only native palm in New Zealand but it is also said to be the only wild palm growing so far south of the Equator, ie. at latitude 45<sup>0</sup> South, halfway between the South Pole and the Equator.

The Maoris ate the savoury buds and young shoots (which killed the plant). Before the arrival of the Europeans, very occasionally a pregnant Maori woman would eat the Nikau heart to help ease childbirth. The more mature palms provided the Maoris with leaf strips for basketry. Although this palm does not offer material suitable for use as timber or firewood, it still provided the Maoris with material (the leaves) for making walls and for thatching their roofs – until eventually this was superseded by corrugated iron. Use of the leaves had at least one important advantage – because each leaflet has a channel it directs raindrops to the ground outside and made the dwelling water-tight.

Nikau palm heart formed from the bases of undeveloped leaves is still viewed as a special delicacy not least, no doubt, because its removal kills the plant. The unripe, green-sheathed flowers can be eaten cooked like cauliflower (*Brassica oleracea* var. *botrytis*) and the immature green berries have also been consumed raw or cooked. Stem tops, which are said to be juicy and fleshy, have been eaten too.

Hard ripe berries are enjoyed by pigeons and wild parrots and some authorities emphasise the birds’ enthusiasm for the fruit by describing the acrobatics they sometimes need to perform in order to get at them. Apparently they will gain purchase on the smooth, slippery trunk by hanging upside down with one claw on the leaf base. After they have been gorging the ground beneath the palm will be littered like gravel with the hard seeds and apparently early settlers in New Zealand used to gather them up for use as shot when ammunition was scarce.