



KAWAKAWA IN AOTEAROA - NEW ZEALAND

The kawakawa tree, botanically known as *Macropiper excelsum*, is a perennial aromatic plant from the Piperaceae family and is native to Aotearoa-New Zealand. Also known as the pepper tree, kawakawa can be found in the undergrowth and on cliff, forest and stream edges throughout lowland Aotearoa- New Zealand from the north to Banks Peninsular in the south. Growing in partial shade it is densely branched with large heart shaped emerald green fleshy leaves and orange – yellow fruit. The leaves are often eaten by the native looper moth / caterpillar. Kawakawa has many curative properties and is commonly utilised by Maori because of the variety of ailments it is used to treat, being known as ‘the pharmacy of the forest’

A MĀORI (INDIGENOUS) PERSPECTIVE

The kawakawa tree has always played a significant role in the Māori spiritual and physical world, tracing the life cycle from birth to death. It begins with conception itself, through birth and naming ceremonies; the removal of tapu; the launching of a new canoe, the blessing of war enterprises; and finally kawakawa leaves are a symbol of mourning, being carried at funerals.

Māori accumulated extensive knowledge about the plants of New Zealand and this is shown in the innumerable spiritual and practical uses, which intertwine with medicinal uses. In order to understand these intricate relationships, one must recognize the Māori belief that plants and humankind have a common origin, both being offspring of Tane Mahuta in his capacity as controller of the forests, and of fertilisation, for he represents the powers of reproduction too. In trees Maori saw living forms that are senior in status to humankind, because Tane created plant life before humankind. Trees are, therefore, to be respected as older relatives, they are the link between humankind and their sacred ancestors, Ranginui (heavenly father) and Papatuanuku (earth mother), and rituals have to be observed before the collection and use of herbal materials required for medicines can take place (Mohi 2001).

Medicinal

Kawakawa is a versatile herb and one of the most important in Māori medicine. It has been used traditionally to treat cuts, wounds, stomach and rheumatic pain, skin disorders, toothache.

The plant found favour with many non-Māori too. "The great virtue contained in the leaves and succulent shoots of the kawakawa shrub is quite sufficient in itself to deal with the most serious bruises and abrasions," wrote surveyor and local historian William Henry Skinner (Pioneer Medical Men of Taranaki, 1933). "A jug or basinful of these leaves steeped with boiling water, and the mixture applied rather hot to the bruise, has great curative powers."

Kawakawa's antimicrobial and analgesic properties make it useful for treating infections, and it is helpful in reducing inflammation of various skin conditions such as psoriasis, eczema and rashes. It is also antidyspeptic (counters dyspepsia or indigestion) and antispasmodic (eases muscle spasms or cramps), so it makes an excellent digestion aid. It is diaphoretic too – it promotes sweating – which some believe is useful for expelling toxins and pathogens via the skin and can help with recovery from colds and flu.

Culinary

Kawakawa is also known as the pepper tree (but not to be confused with horopito) and is useful for flavouring foods. You can dry kawakawa for tea or seasoning as you would any herb. Hang it in small bunches in a dry, airy room out of direct sunlight. Or use a food dehydrator. It takes 12 hours on the lowest heat setting to dry the leaves to a crisp state. You can speed up the process on a higher heat, but you will likely lose its medicinal qualities. The leaves can then be crushed in a mortar and pestle, or grinder, and stored in an airtight container. An infusion of dried leaves (make as for tea) makes a delicious soup base, or can be used in place of stock, as they have a savoury flavour.

In the Garden

Kawakawa is endemic to New Zealand. It's found in lowland forests and along coastal areas throughout the North Island and the upper half of the South Island. Plants can grow up to 6m, but home gardeners will find they're easily kept trimmed to a more manageable size. You'll often see holes in the leaves caused by the caterpillar of the kawakawa looper moth, which restricts its diet to kawakawa. It's not detrimental to the plant. Grow kawakawa in part-shade to shade. Plants don't mind wind but shelter them from frosts.

Kawakawa can be grown from seed. In some areas of the country the ripe orange fruit can be found on plants throughout the year, but the main fruiting period is typically between January and March. Female and male flowering spikes occur on separate plants. The male flower spike is taller and thinner, so it's easy to tell the difference. The spikes on the female plant turn orange and fleshy, and it's here you will find the seed. The seed is small and embedded in the flesh, so you will need to extract the seeds in water. Pick the fruit, place them in a bowl and squish with a wooden spoon, then cover with water and leave for a couple of days. You can then wash off any remaining flesh. Seeds can take between one and five months to germinate. Sow in seed-raising mix without covering – just press into the mix.

TAHA & KAWAKAWA

Our kawakawa is hand picked from ancestral land at Otewa near Otorohanga, and from Puketi Forest, Paihia. Kawakawa only grows wild and is not commercially grown, luckily it grows in abundance in many parts of Aotearoa-New Zealand. Ideally the kawakawa is harvested from the leaves that have been eaten by the looper moth/caterpillar as the insect holes tell us that the leaf is at its best for picking. Picking the insect ravaged leaves actually helps the plant thrive, making it bushier and more productive meaning the harvest of kawakawa leaves for TAHA is 100% sustainable.

The function of kawakawa in nature where it is often found in damp places and alongside streams is to purify the water before it enters the water course. When drinking TAHA the kawakawa cleanses the blood and improves the way your body works in very much the same fashion.

We are often asked what the word TAHA means. For Māori TAHA has a few meanings including 'to belong', 'side' and 'edge'. We have incorporated these meanings into a story for TAHA.

*TAHA **belongs** to Aotearoa-New Zealand, whanau (family) work **side by side** to bring you this drink from the **edge** of the World*

ENJOY