

***Alectryon excelsus* (Titoki)**

Article by Mick Parsons

Titoki, *Alectryon excelsus*, is one of the most attractive trees in the native lowland forest remnants around Wellington.

The genus *Alectryon* features fifteen species, all of which are tropical in origin except the two New Zealand species, one of which, *Alectryon grandis*, is found only on the Three Kings Islands.

Titoki can be also found in most parts of the North Island and, in the South Island, from Banks Peninsula in the east to central Westland in the west.

It has spreading branches with shining, attractive pinnate leaves, a trunk often featuring many twists and a smooth dark bark sometimes covered with lichens. Early European settlers called it New Zealand ash, but it is now more often referred to as New Zealand oak.

Titoki yielded an easily worked timber, once valued for tool handles, yokes (as part of horse harnesses), and in coach building.

As well as being one of the most important forest canopy trees, it can also make an ideal feature tree in gardens. Local authorities are increasingly using it as a street tree, as an attractive and pleasant change to the usual exotic plantings.

Titoki will extend to a height of about 9m with a spreading canopy and, provided it is sheltered from the southerly salt winds, will thrive in full sun or partial shade. It exhibits only a moderate rate of growth to be about 5m high in ten years and prefers a well drained but medium to heavy soil.

They are a long-lived tree and there are many examples of isolated titoki that have survived the ravages of 19th century land clearing still dotted on farmed landscapes in the Wellington region. A stand of titoki provide a subtle colour contrast to pasture and are welcome shade for livestock.

As with most of our native flowering trees, the purple flowers are inconspicuous. They emerge in the spring and are small, hairy with no petals, but have a pleasant fragrance.

The colourful ripe seed capsules, however, are strikingly attractive and very obvious. Initially they are a hairy, woody capsule that on ripening split to reveal bright red and black fruit (the black portion being the seed). They take a whole year to ripen so flowers and fruit may be found on the tree at the same time.

The ripe fruit is a favourite food of kereru (native wood pigeons). Both the new season's flowers and last year's seed can sometimes be seen at eye level on a titoki along the canopy walkway at Otari-Wilton's Bush. The characteristic trunks of other titoki also come into view at various points on the Circular Walk.