

The Karaka Tree

By Glenis Chapman - Kapiti Woodworkers Guild - October 2024

Names:

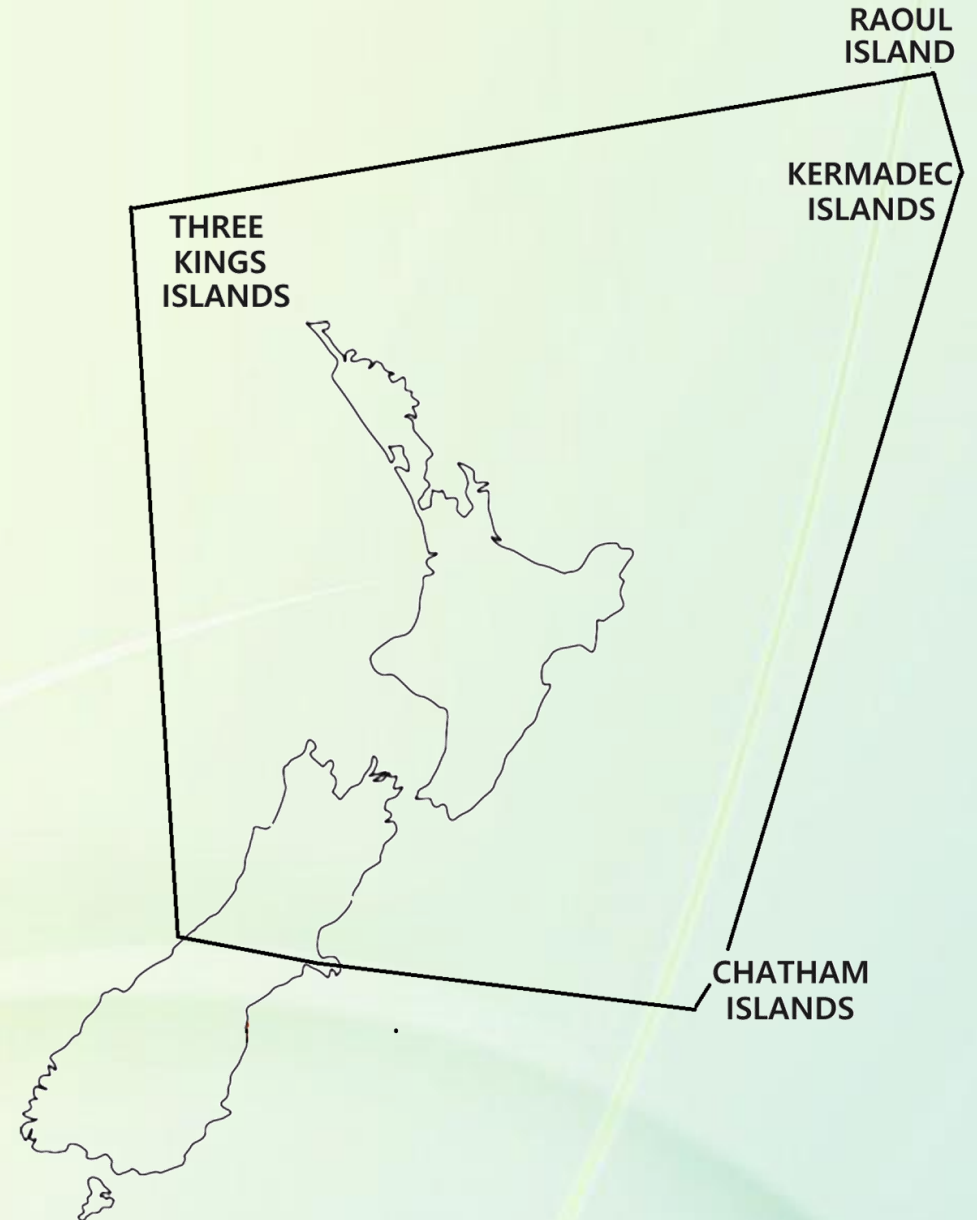
- Karaka
- *Corynocarpus laevigatus*
- New Zealand Laurel
- Maori meaning - orange
- Kopi - Chatham Islands



Corynocarpus laevigatus

is native to

- The North Island
- Northern South Island
- Three Kings Islands
- Raoul Island
- The Kermadec Islands
- Chatham Islands



Location

- widespread in coastal habitats
- often forming a major part of coastal forest
- rarely dominates

Most botanists consider it to be native only to the northern half of the North Island, having been planted elsewhere by Māori near former Pa (village) sites, and subsequently spread by birds.

Uses

- Landscaping - hedging, specimen tree
- Ornamental - greenery, shade,
- Attracting native birds
- Traditional Maori medicine
- Maori ceremonies
- Houseplant
- Floral arrangements
- Firewood





The tree

- Relatively fast growing, 6m in 10 years
- About 18m tall, up to 8m wide
- 1 central trunk, up to 1m diameter
- Evergreen
- Dioecious species (male or female trees)
- Easy to grow, hardy, low maintenance



The leaves



- Dark, glossy leaves
- Paler on the underside
- Up to 20cm long

The flowers - August to November



Male



Female

The fruit



Fruit

- orange flesh when ripe
- each berry contains a single seed
- ripens January to April
- pulp of ripe fruit is edible, sweet and aromatic
- kernels contain the toxin; alkaloid karakin



- kernels are toxic to humans, dogs, cattle, sheep and pigs
- ingestion can cause vomiting, convulsions and paralysis
- kernels remain toxic for several years



Wood

- light in colour
- spongy and susceptible to rot
- brittle when dry
- can be used for woodworking
- primary use - firewood.

Bark

- Fairly smooth
- Silvery grey to brown

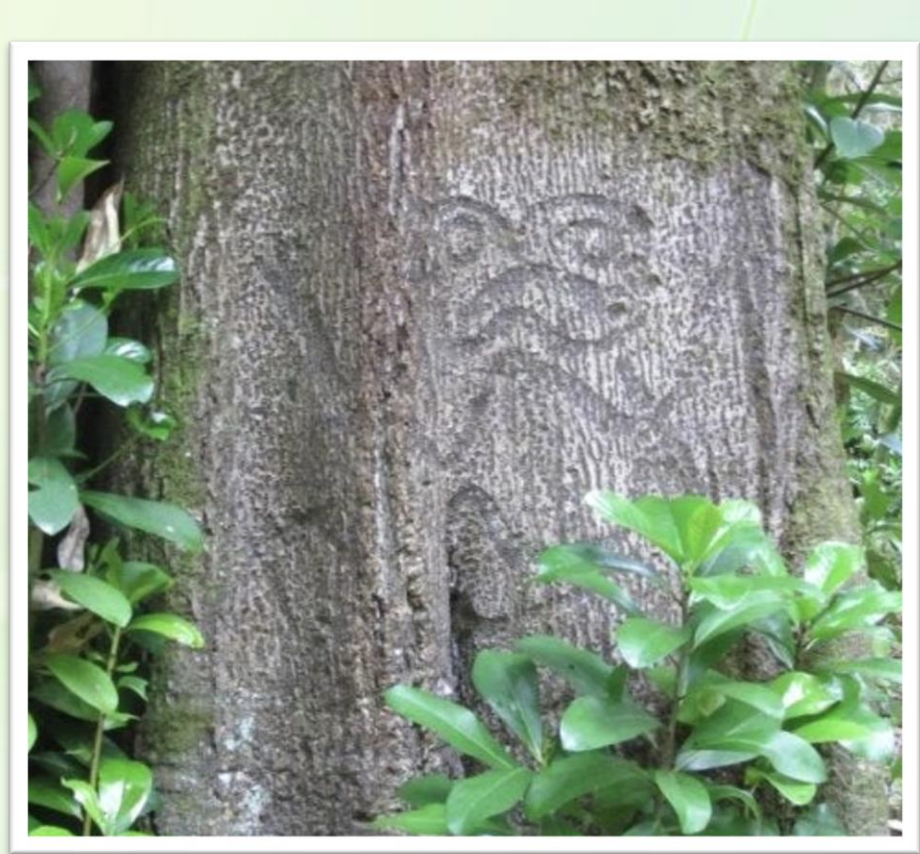
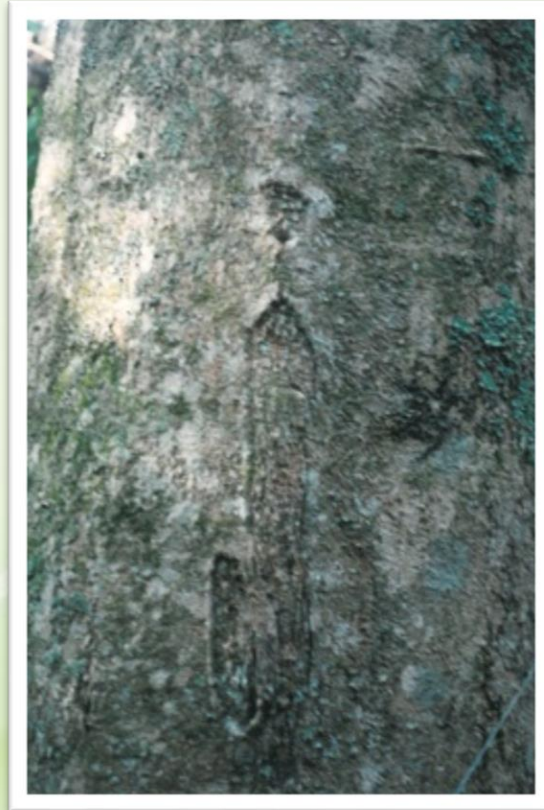
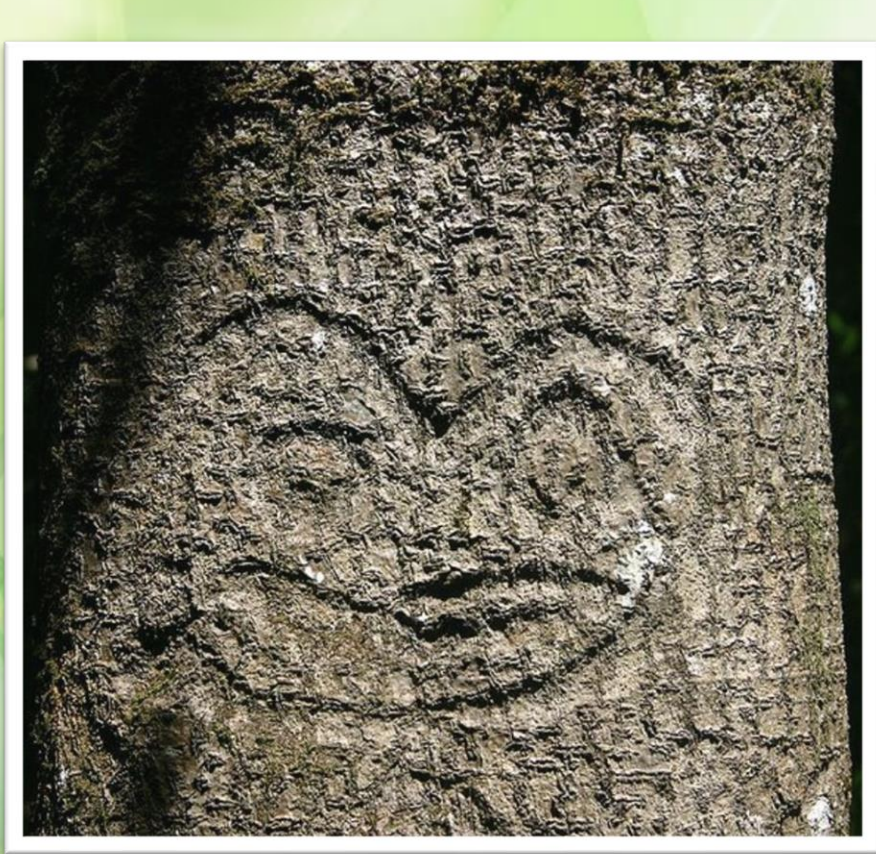


Maori used Karaka

- garlands of leaves worn in mourning or approaching ancestors' graves.
- glossy surface of the leaves used over wounds to promote healing
- Underside of the leaf has a drawing effect, and was used to treat boils
- Seeds used as a form of currency
- Seeds were grown and processed as food crop

Bark Carvings

Memorial images were carved into the karaka bark.
There are some on the Chatham Islands dating back to
Moriori times.



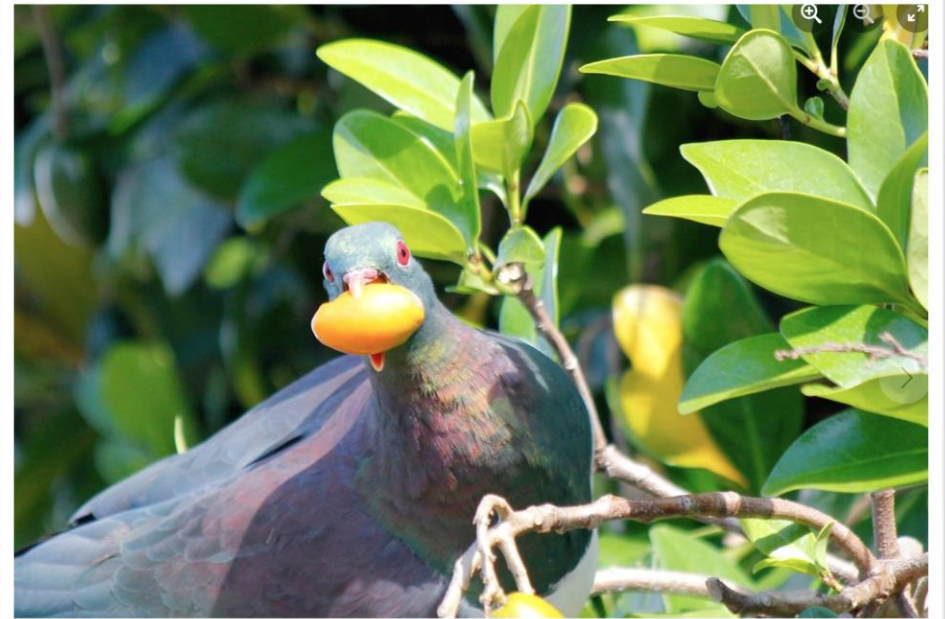
Processing the seeds for eating

- seeds would be placed in kete (basket), and washed in the river to remove the outer pulp
- then baked and sun dried
- prepared kernels keep for 2–3 years



Bird life

- nectar eaten by Tui and Bellbirds
- seeds eaten & distributed by Kereru
- berries ripen when few other fruits available



Cultivation

- cuttings are very difficult to strike
- easily grown from fresh seed
- seedlings are frost-tender and sensitive to cold
- Karaka naturalises in suitable habitats
- Grows in most free draining soil types

Four species around the Pacific

- *Corynocarpus cribbianus* - New Guinea, Aru Islands, Queensland
- *Corynocarpus rupestris* Guymer - Queensland, New South Wales
- *Corynocarpus similis* Hemsley - Vanuatu
- *Corynocarpus dissimilis* Hemsley - New Caledonia



Corynocarpus dissimilis
Hemsley



Corynocarpus
rupestris Guymer



Corynocarpus dissimilis
Hemsley



Corynocarpus
cribbianus



Karaka in Hawaii



- re-forestation programme in 1920s
- seeds dropped from planes over several islands
- now considered an aggressive invader
- threatens the existence of Heau (*Exocarpus luteolus*)
one of Hawaii's most endangered species.

Karaka hybrids



Alba & variegatus

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