



## 2. FLAX

Maori name. Harakeke  
Common name. Flax  
Botanical name . *Phormium tenax*

### What does it look like?

Flax has an easily recognisable shape: its long, pointed leaves fan out from the root to a height of about three metres. Flaxes have a rhizome, or an underground stem, which is short and stout. Thick, fleshy roots sprouting from the rhizome hold the plant firmly in the soil. There are many different varieties of flax. All have tall, tree-like flower stems with dull red flowers that produce large numbers of shiny black seeds and lots of nectar from November to January - a great attraction to birds, especially tui.

### Where does it grow?

Flax grows throughout New Zealand. It is a very adaptable plant because it can put up with both wet or dry sites, warm or cold climates and soils of high or low fertility.

### Growing tips . . . in your plant growing unit

Flaxes don't need potting on: they can stay in the root trainer until being planted out - just trim the leaves if you need to make more room for them in the growing unit.

### Planting out for soil conservation

Flax doesn't mind being waterlogged, so it is very useful for planting in soils which are so damp that other plants won't grow. It is often used to plant stream edges, where its roots help to bind the soil and stop stream bank erosion. Its leaves also shade the water, cutting down light levels and reducing overgrowth of water weeds. Because it can also grow on dry, windswept hillsides, flax is especially useful for revegetating old erosion scars. It provides good wind shelter for pasture or native seedlings.

### Used to ...

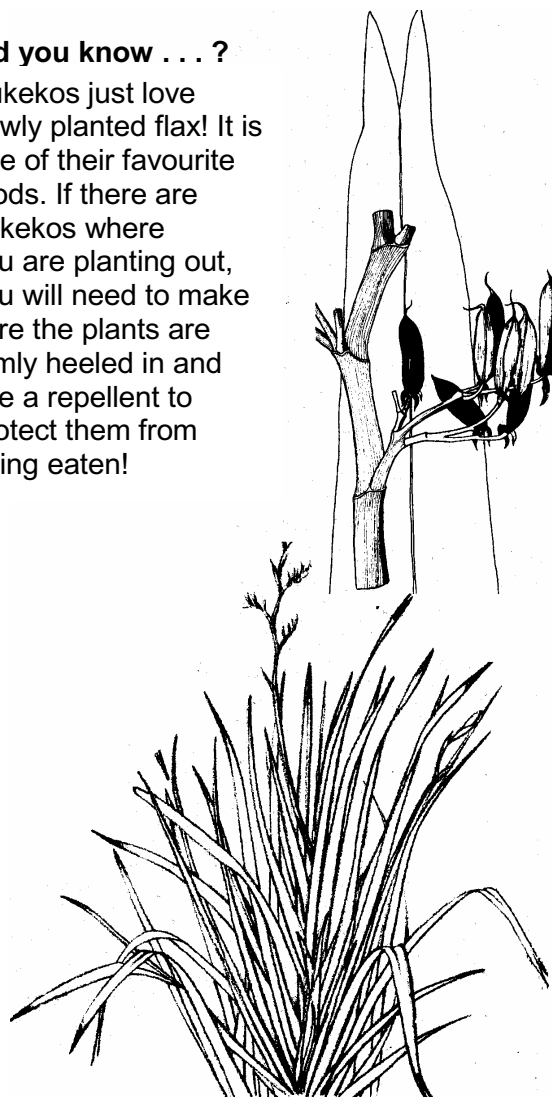
Pre-European Maori used flax as their main fibre plant for making kete, nets, mats, cloaks, sandals, ropes and many other useful things. When dyed it makes decorative tukutuku panels and patterned kete. Flax nectar was also used by the Maori as a sweetener before Europeans brought sugar to New Zealand. Flax also had medical uses as an antiseptic, a purgative (to encourage bowel

movement), to treat burns and as a splint for broken bones.

Flax was the basis of a major export industry in the 1800's and early 1900's, with large flax mills eventually being built. The flax was harvested and placed on drying racks for bleaching in the sunlight before being processed into matting and baling materials.

### Did you know . . . ?

Pukekos just love newly planted flax! It is one of their favourite foods. If there are pukekos where you are planting out, you will need to make sure the plants are firmly heeled in and use a repellent to protect them from being eaten!



*Pictures from Peter Johnson and Pat Brooke, 1989, Wetland Plants in New Zealand, DSIR Publishing and Lindsay Poole and Nancy Adams, 1990, Trees and Shrubs of New Zealand, DSIR Publishing.*

*Prepared by the Trees for Survival Trust, with the help of the Lotteries Grants Board. Schools may copy this material and use it for educational purposes.*