

NEW ZEALAND NATIVES

A surprising number of plants from the other side of the world will thrive in the UK. These are some of the best...



The over-ubiquitous use by landscape architects in the UK of New Zealand native plants such as phormiums and hebes, deployed across the nation in car parks and median strips, may well pay tribute to the plants' hardy and tenacious nature, but it does little to endear garden designers to explore the more obscure delights of that nation's flora. For there is in fact a wide selection of lesser known plants suitable for the milder parts of the UK, or those with a good microclimate, which will withstand temperatures down to -5°C and will survive all but the most severe winters and sudden early frosts. Most prefer moist but well drained soil and accept sunny or partially shaded sites.

The range of native species available in Britain provides an array of weird and wonderful forms, adapted over millennia to a wide range of geographic and climatic conditions, and proving themselves most adaptable in cultivation. For designers, they provide distinct and often sculptural shapes and textures, suitable as both features and foils within planting schemes.

Trees

One of New Zealand's finest trees *Metrosideros excelsa*, with its abundance of red, bottlebrush-like flowers, would be an obvious choice to make a distinct design statement, but unfortunately it is rather too tender for these climes unless kept under glass. Nevertheless a number of other natives may be suitably employed in British outdoor conditions. The genus *Podocarpus* offers a range of coniferous evergreen species which can endure temperatures as low as -15°C, and which are comparable to *Taxus* in both form and usage.

Podocarpus totara, one of NZ's mightiest forest trees found throughout the country, is renowned for its strength and durability, and was valued highly by both early Maori and Pakeha inhabitants for its utilitarian properties. In the forest it can reach 30m high, but in cultivation usually achieves only a third of that size. It has distinctive, needle-like leaves and a dense, prickly habit. *P. aurea* is similar but with impressive yellow leaves, *P. acutifolius* has a smaller 3m high form which can be shaped or used as a hedge, whilst *P. nivalis* is more appropriate for low-level coverage, with prostrate and erect forms growing to 1m high.

The strikingly unusual form of *Psuedopanax crassifolius* adds a bit of drama to any garden. It has a particularly prehistoric look, with a thin trunk hosting a sparse rotary arrangement of dark 60cm long, narrow, serrated, lance-



Photo: Darryl Moore



“ONE OF NEW ZEALANDS’S MOST POPULAR EXPORTS IS MANUKA HONEY, CREATED FROM THE NECTAR OF *LEPTOSPERMUM SCOPARIUM*”

like leaves, pointing downwards. The foliage no doubt provided an ample foil to hostile predators such as the now extinct Moa. At about 3m high, this distinctive shape is indicative only of the juvenile phase of the tree, which lasts about 15 years, after which it undergoes metamorphosis into a more conventional trunk twice the height with a round-headed crown. *P. ferox* has strikingly bronze-coloured leaves with more pronounced, toothed leaf margins, and is slightly smaller than the former species. *P. 'Sabre'* provides a more erect shrub-like shape at only 3m, with wider, thicker leathery dark green leaves, veined with an orange mid-rib.

Dodonea viscosa 'Purpurea' is a fine, structural small tree reaching 3-7m with elliptic purplish leaves 12cm long. Its elegant form is enhanced by clusters of small greenish flowers, followed by membranous pink winged pods.

Shrubs

One of NZ's most popular exports is Manuka honey, created from the nectar of the NZ

Tea Tree, *Leptospermum scoparium*, a species of flowering plant in the myrtle family *Myrtaceae*. A scrubby, medium-sized evergreen shrub, it is a pioneer coloniser of cleared land. Growing to 2-5m, it features needle-like leaves on hard wood branches, dotted with small single or semi-double white flowers whose petals form a ring around a dark centre. The cultivar 'Red Damask' produces an abundance of deep red flowers about 12mm in width.

A number of useful *Coprosma repens* cultivars provide a distinctively colourful assortment of plants characterised by thick, very glossy leaves, with recurved margins, occasionally to the extent that it may be cylindrical in cross-section. *C. repens* 'Lemon and Lime' has a yellow centre to the leaves whilst *C. repens* 'Pacific Sunset' is a full-on assault of blazing red glory. As structural plants they offer the potential to be used for a distinct visual interplay with other plants, or can be utilised en masse as hedging. Another plant well suited to shaping and handy for hedging is *Griselinia littoralis*, a fast-growing large evergreen shrub with light green, broadly oval leaves.

Solanum lacinatedum is an evergreen soft wood shrub, although it tends to behave more perennially in this country, growing to an impressive size of 1.8m x 1.8m and giving mass and body where necessary. The green, large, shiny, lobed leaves are accented by showy purple flowers 50mm across which develop into small, orange, egg-shaped fruits, edible when ripe.

Well described by its common name, the wire-netting bush, *Corokia cotoneaster* is certainly sculptural in its appeal, and is a plant that will be happy in drier conditions. Growing up to 3m high, this divaricating shrub has almost black branches covered in fine silver hairs, and appears to be almost leafless. It produces small bright yellow flowers that hang like stars within the body of the plant that transform into red fruits, hanging on the plant for months.

Muehlenbeckia complexa is another great example of NZ's unique flora. It is a vigorous, evergreen shrub with glossy small-leaves, which tangles itself into an incredible dense and wiry mass of brown stems. Its habit endears it to being used either sculpturally scrambling along the ground, as a climber up fences or even trained as a bizarre type of topiary. Small star shaped, scented greenish-white flowers are produced in late summer, followed by white berries.



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Leptospermum scoparium 'Red Damask' with its woody scrub-like form, packs a striking punch with its flowers

TOP LEFT

Coprosma species cover a wide range of shrubs with brightly coloured glossy leaves. *C. repens* 'Pacific Sunset' offers a glorious blaze of red

TOP RIGHT

The interweaved forms and contrasting colours of *Libertia peregrinans* and *Muehlenbeckia complexa*

LEFT

The delicate pink seed pods of *Dodonea viscosa* 'Purpurea' are an added value bonus to a hard working small structural tree

RIGHT

The hard spiky leaves of *Popodcarpus aurea* provide structure and definition combined with distinctly striking colour





TOP The delicate foliage and spiky seedheads of *Aceana*

BOTTOM The subtle compact fronds of the ground hugging fern *Blechnum penna-marina*

Grass forms

The vertical accents of grasses and similarly shaped plants add an essential element to any planting arsenal. *Anementhele lessonia* is a familiar NZ native deployed in British gardens for its graceful drooping leaves and feathery inflorescences. Its thuggish, self-seeding, colonial behaviour should warn any designer off including it in any polite prairie or New Perennial style schemes, but grown in combination with plants which can hold their own ground, it is an essential evergreen structural element. *Astelia chathamica* is also a recognisable feature plant here, offering a striking silver alternative to phormiums, with its sword-like leaves forming a clump of 1.5m x 1.5m. Despite its light foliage, it actually prefers a semi-shaded position. *A. nervosa* should be similarly sited and is a species which forms a tighter clump with variable leaf size and colours ranging from reddish tones through to green. A selection of *Libertia* sit somewhere in between the aforementioned genera, in terms of form. *Libertia grandiflora* is a rhizomatous tufted plant with narrow, drooping leaves, growing to 0.5m. It delights in the spring with small panicles of saucer-shaped 3-petalled white flowers on tall stems, followed by reddish black seed capsules.

L. ixioides is a smaller growing more upright form with lower bright yellow seed pods, and *L. peregrinans* has a creeping habit and sports erect brownish green leaves with an orange midrib.

Ferns

Tree ferns are a staple of the New Zealand bush and an important part of the country's identity. The frond of *Cyathea dealbata*, or Silver Fern, is the country's national symbol and is emblazoned on everything from the All Blacks kit to Air New Zealand's logo featuring a stylised koru (unfurling frond). As its name suggests, it has fronds with shimmering silver undersides up to 4m long, providing a visual contrast from above and below. It is a slow-growing species averaging about 1-2cm of trunk growth a year, and can reach a height of 10m.

C. medullaris or Mamaku is a common self-seeder in its homeland and the tallest native tree fern growing to 15m. It features distinct black, hirsute stems and trunk, which develops hexagonal patterns as the older fronds drop off. *Dicksonia squarrosa* is the fastest growing tree fern, capable of 2-15cm trunk growth per annum, reaching anywhere between 2-6m. Its elegant proportions sport fronds about

1.5m long in a delicate umbrella fashion upon a slender trunk covered in russet brown hairs. For any adventurous designer, these tree ferns provide an interesting alternative to the familiar *D. antarctica*, offering a subtler array of nuanced textures and tones. They do require similar care and sheltered sites as they are prone to frost, and also need plenty of moisture. Perhaps the main drawback is that prices tend to reflect their rarity of supply in this country.

On the smaller scale, a couple of low-growing, moist shade lovers of the *Blechnum* genus perform well. *Blechnum fluviatile* or Octopus Fern gains its moniker from 50cm long fronds with round leaflets splayed out in an unusual ground-hugging rosette shape, with upright fertile fronds and drooping sterile fronds. As it ages, it develops a short trunk, suspending the fronds over lower growing plants. *B. penna-marina* is a low-growing, compact species 20cm high with a 1m spread. The fronds appear pink and mature to a deep glossy green with pale underside and reddish brown stalks.

Groundcover

A selection of native ground covers offer designers the ability to utilise them not only



WHERE TO FIND IN THE UK

Tree Ferns:

- **Fernatix**
www.fernatrix.co.uk
- **Kelways**
www.kelways.co.uk
- **Trevena Cross Nurseries**
www.trevenacross.co.uk

Trees, Shrubs, grasses, groundcover:

- **Plantbase**
www.plantbase.co.uk
- **Burncoose Nurseries**
www.burncoose.co.uk
- **Eleplants Nursery**
www.eleplants.co.uk
- **Urban Jungle**
www.urbanjungle.uk.com

“ANY DESIGNER WISHING TO BROADEN THEIR PLANTING PALETTE IN AN IMAGINATIVE MANNER WOULD BE REMISS NOT TO EMBRACE SUCH INTERESTING FLORA”

for underplanting taller plants but also as features in their own right spread across larger open areas.

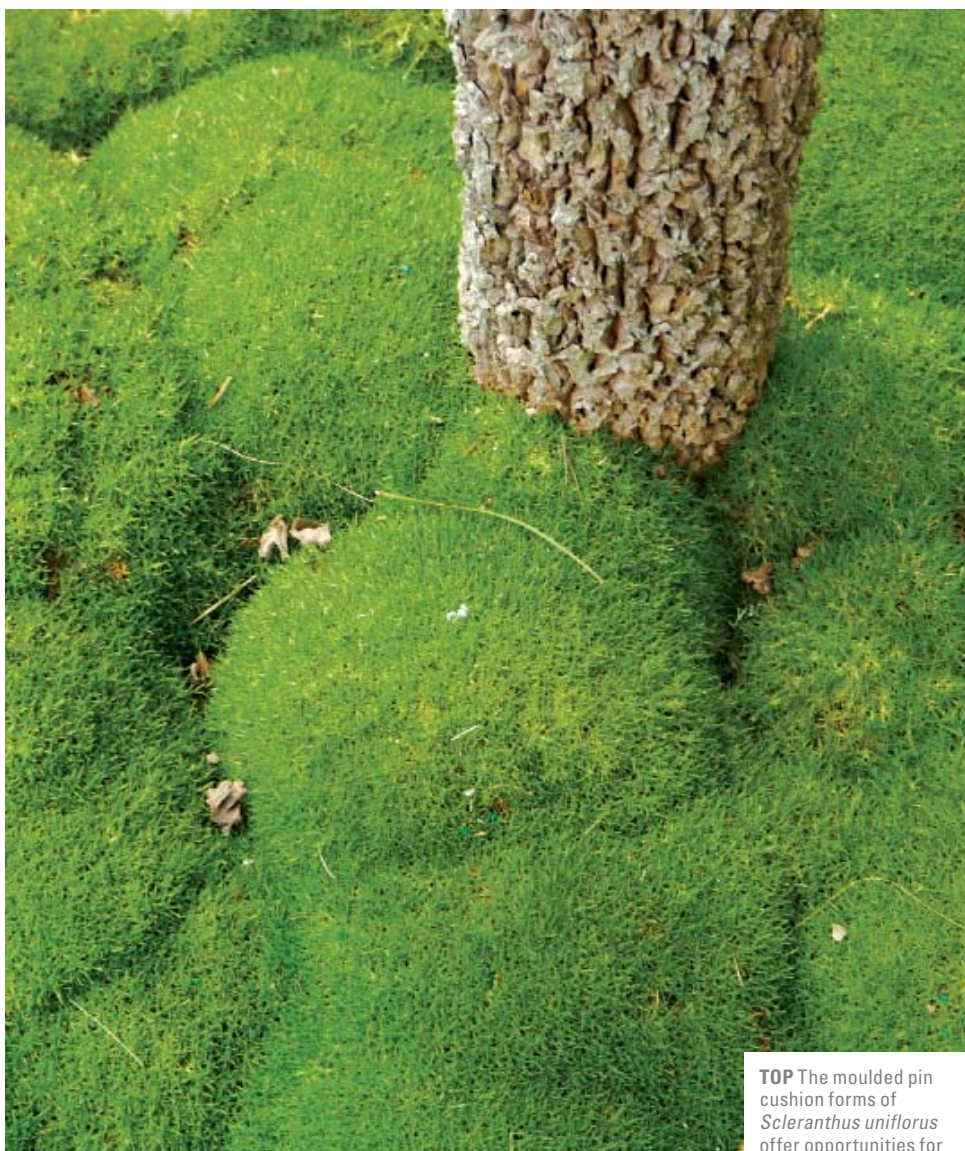
The small subtle bronze tinged pinnate leaves of *Aceana microphylla*, an evergreen perennial with prostrate rooting stems, provides a surface hugging fine carpet with a spread of 50cm. Globular whitish flowerheads are held aloft on short stems, and followed by attractive reddish burrs or ‘bidi-bids’ with a notorious propensity for sticking to clothing, should one happen to brush past them. A number of species offer quite a colourful spectrum of foliage including the purple *A. inermis* ‘Purpurea’ and the glauca versions *A. affinis*, *A. caesiiglauca* and *A. saccaticupula* ‘Blue Haze’.

Fuschia procumbens is a surprising, wide-spreading, mat-forming shrub which provides dense coverage at a height of 10cm. It has delicate small, bright green heart-shaped leaves 20mm long with distinctive intricate orange flowers and blue anthers, which are followed by pinkish/red berries.

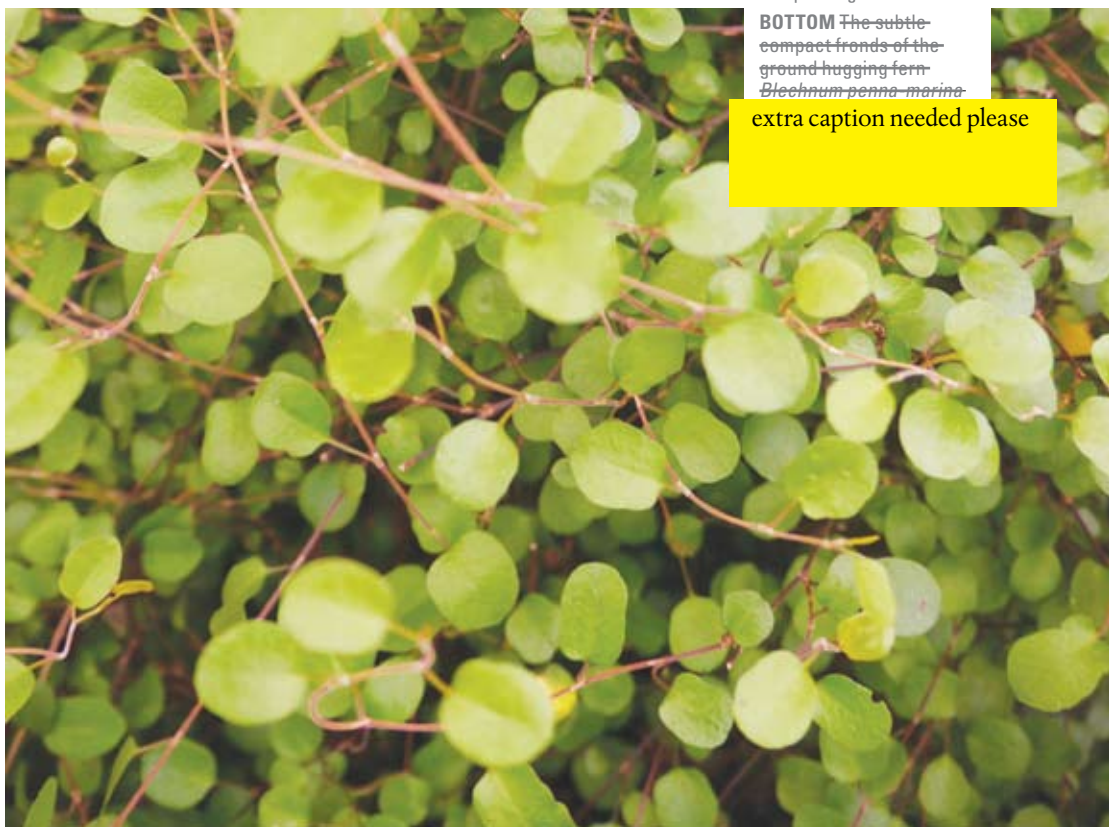
The herbaceous perennial *Gunnera prorepens* is certainly at the other end of the size spectrum to its relation *G. manicata*, although it shares its predilection for moist aspects. Its Liliputian features include ovate, scalloped, bronze leaves and compact spikes of inconspicuous flowers and clusters of red fruit, with a spread of 20cm. *G. hamiltonii* offers a similar form but with green foliage.

Scleranthus uniflorus looks deceptively like a moss but is actually a member of the carnation family which thrives in full sun, and if subject to too much water is susceptible to fungal attack. Attaining a spread of 1m, it has tightly packed, tiny bright green foliage with very small flowers which are barely discernable. Its sculptural qualities can be appreciated individually or as massed mounds. *S. bifloris* is very similar but with darker green leaves.

Given the diversity of unusual shape, tone and texture offered by NZ plants, any designer wishing to broaden their planting palette in an imaginative manner would be remiss not to embrace such interesting flora, and will be duly rewarded for the effort of tracking down some of these rarer gems.○



TOP The moulded pin cushion forms of *Scleranthus uniflorus* offer opportunities for sculptural ground cover



BOTTOM The subtle compact fronds of the ground-hugging fern *Blechnum penna-marina*

extra caption needed please