



Māra Takutai Coastal Gardens

A guide to growing gardens that support our coastal environment and wildlife.

Coastcare
Te Taitokerau

Northland
REGIONAL COUNCIL
Te Kaunihera ā rohe o Te Taitokerau

Te hiranga o ngā māra takutai

Why coastal gardens matter



Many coastal properties have gardens that need to handle salt-laden winds, sandy soils, and long dry periods. Choosing appropriate, eco-sourced, native plant species for coastal gardens can reduce the need for watering, improve native biodiversity, and decrease vulnerability to natural hazards such as coastal erosion.

Over time, some commonly used exotic garden plants – such as agapanthus, gazania, and coastal banksia – have spread into dunes and coastal reserves, where they grow quickly and overwhelm native species.

In contrast, many native coastal species are naturally adapted to harsh coastal conditions and make excellent, low-impact choices for local gardens.

They actively support native wildlife by providing resources like nectar and berries as food sources, offering shelter in dense vegetation, and providing

nesting sites for birds. Well-designed coastal gardens can act as stepping stones between remnant coastal habitats, helping wildlife move safely through developed areas. By increasing the availability of food, shelter, and breeding spaces close to the coast, these gardens play a quiet but important role in strengthening local ecosystems and improving the resilience of wildlife and coastal landscapes.

Kia whakatōngia ēnei, kua ko ēnei

Plant this, not that

Weedy exotics to avoid

These garden plants often escape into coastal dunes and reserves, spread quickly, and can suppress native vegetation.



Exotic Ice plant



Gazania



Agapanthus



Wild gladioli



Century plant



Marram grass



Cape ivy



Red hot pokers



Arctotis



Freesia



Purple groundsel



Spreading succulents

Great alternatives

These species are ecologically appropriate, support native wildlife, and handle coastal conditions well.



Horokaka

New Zealand ice plant
(*Disphyma australe*)



Waiu-atu

Shore spurge
(*Euphorbia glauca*)



Harakeke

Flax
(*Phormium tenax*)



Kōwharawhara

Coastal astelia
(*Astelia banksii*)



Puarangi

Native hibiscus
(*Hibiscus richardsonii*) or prickly
hibiscus (*Sabdariffa diversifolia*)



Purple hebe

(*Veronica speciosa*)

Toetoe versus Pampas



Te Werahi beach in Cape Reinga with Pampas grass

Exotic pampas is now more common than native toetoe due to its large volumes of wind dispersed seed.

How to tell them apart:

- » Pampas starts flowering in autumn, while toetoe flowers in spring.
- » The flowerhead of toetoe droops, while the pampas flowerhead is generally upright.
- » The edges of pampas leaves will cut your fingers, but toetoe won't.
- » Remnants of dead pampas leaves form curls at the base of the plant, but toetoe retains its old leaves and has a white, powdery substance at the base of the plant.
- » Pampas has no visible vein between the mid-rib and edge of the leaf, while toetoe does.
- » Toetoe leaves are shinier than pampas.



Distinctive fluffy, upright pampas flowers



Native toetoe with its droopy blooms



Dead leaf curls at the base of pampas



White powder at base of toetoe

Ngā momo tupu mō tō māra takutai

Coastal natives for your coastal garden



Below is a selection of native plants suited to Northland coastal gardens. These species are adapted to salt spray, wind, sandy soils and drought, and they all support wildlife in some way.

Ngā tupu hīpoki whenua me ngā tupu iti
Groundcovers and low-growing plants

Ngā tupu he wawaenga te rahi
Medium growing Plants

Ngā mauwha me ngā rākau o te takutai
Shrubs and coastal trees

Ngā tupu hīpoki whenua me ngā tupu iti

Groundcovers and low-growing plants

Kōwharawhara

Coastal astelia | Grows to 1 m high

Narrow, silver-green leaves. Pale green flowers bloom in spring, followed by purple-black berries in autumn.



Hinarepe | Sand tussock

Austrofestuca littoralis | Grows to 0.7 m high

Bluish-green tussock grass that grows on foredunes and upper beaches. Its dense roots and leaves trap sand effectively.



Carex

Carex testacea | Grows to 0.3 m high

Compact grass with orange-bronze tones, common on back dunes. Adds colour and texture to coastal gardens and borders.



Tātaraheke | Sand coprosma

Coprosma acerosa | Grows to 0.5 m high

Low, spreading shrub with wiry stems and orange-tinged leaves. Produces pale blue berries that attract birds and lizards.



Ngā tupu hīpoki whenua me ngā tupu iti

Groundcovers and low-growing plants

Waiu-atua | Shore spurge

Euphorbia glauca | Grows to 2 m high

Distinctive blue-grey leaves and upright stems. Found naturally on cliffs and dunes; prefers free-draining sandy soils.



Pīngao

Ficinia spiralis | Grows to 1 m high

Golden-leaved sand binder. Grows best in shifting sand in the foredune and full sun; also prized for weaving. After clearing nearby exotic vegetation, plant deeply in the sand.



Tōtera | Climbing fuchsia

Fuchsia procumbens | Grows to 0.2 m high

A low-growing coastal fuchsia that thrives in sandy soils. It forms a spreading groundcover with unusual flowers that support native insects and lizards.



Puarangi | Native hibiscus

Hibiscus richardsonii | Grows to 1 m high

A strictly coastal plant, with large cream flowers in summer. This Threatened – Nationally Critical is very palatable to stock and is restricted to the upper North Island.



Ngā tupu hīpoki whenua me ngā tupu iti

Groundcovers and low-growing plants

Pōhuehue

Muelenbeckia complexa | Grows to 1 m high

Vigorous, hardy groundcover that forms dense, tangled mats. Ideal for stabilising slopes and the landward edge of dunes.



Toroheke | Sand daphne

Pimelea villosa | Grows to 0.4 m high

Low, circular shrub with small, delicate leaves and white flowers. Endangered species that prefers sand dunes.



Coprosma

Coprosma cheesemanii |
Grows to 0.5 m high

Low growing coprosma which often fruits profusely with bright orange/red berries. Will grow on exposed sites. Very hardy.



Rengarenga

Arthropodium cirratum | Grows to 0.6 m high

Clump-forming with strappy leaves and starry white flowers. Naturally coastal forest edge plant; copes well with salt air.



Ngā tupu he wawaenga te rahi

Medium growing Plants

Oioi

Apodasmia similis | Grows to 1 m high

Grows in damp dune hollows and along the edge of streams, estuaries and salt marshes. Forms tidy clumps with upright stems that turn golden. Less drought tolerant than wiwī.



Toetoe

Austroderia splendens | Grows to 3 m high

Tall coastal grass with graceful plumes in summer. Tolerates drought, wind, and salt. Don't confuse it with invasive pampas.



Wiwī

Ficinia nodosa | Grows to 1 m high

Compact, rush-like plant forms dense clumps. Ideal for defining paths and edges and providing texture in coastal plantings. Versatile plant which can grow well in dry areas.



Harakeke | Flax

Phormium tenax | Grows to 3 m high

Strong, upright leaves and tall flower stalks attract tūi. Extremely hardy and tolerant of salt, wind, and drought.



Ngā tupu he wawaenga te rahi

Medium growing Plants

Puarangi | Prickly hibiscus

Sabdariffa diversifolia | Grows to 2 m high

A coastal native hibiscus relative with glossy foliage and pale-yellow flowers, well suited to warm, frost-free sites and valued for its resilience and wildlife appeal.



Purple hebe

Veronica speciosa | Grows to 3 m high

A sprawling shrub with glossy leaves that produces magenta flowers. Grows naturally in low, windswept scrub rather than under trees.



Raupō-Taranga | Poor Knights lily

Xeronema callistemon | Grows to 1 m high

Prefers full sun, good drainage, and protection from frost. Forms long, flax-like leaves and produces striking red, bottlebrush-like flower spikes from spring to early summer.



Ngā mauwha me ngā rākau o te takutai

Shrubs and coastal trees

Taupata

Coprosma repens | Grows to 4 m high

Hardy shrub with glossy, rounded green leaves. Great for shelter from sea spray and wind, with bright orange berries for birds.



Karamū

Coprosma robusta | Grows to 6 m high

Fast-growing shrub suited to sheltered areas. Glossy leaves and orange fruit provide food and cover for birds.



Ti kōuka | Cabbage tree

Cordyline australis | Grows to 17 m high

Iconic tree with tufts of narrow leaves. White spring flowers and summer berries attract birds. Prefers damp areas or sheltered back dunes.



Akeake

Dodonaea viscosa | Grows to 10 m high

Tough, fast-growing shrub. Attractive winged seed pods appear in summer; best planted back from direct salt winds.



Ngā mauwha me ngā rākau o te takutai

Shrubs and coastal trees

Mānuka

Leptospermum scoparium

Grows to 5 m high

Hardy shrub with white or pink flowers loved by bees. Excellent for colonising bare coastal sites and improving soil stability.



Coastal māhoe

Melicytus novae-zelandiae

Grows to 4 m high

A hardy coastal shrub that tolerates wind and salt spray, coastal māhoe provides dense shelter and berries that support native birds.



Pōhutukawa

Metrosideros excelsa | Grows to 20 m high

Iconic coastal tree with brilliant red summer blooms. Best suited to back dunes and sheltered coastal slopes.



Ngaio

Myoporum laetum | Grows to 8 m high

Fast-growing coastal tree with fleshy, speckled leaves. Extremely wind-tolerant and great for shelter, but frost-tender when young.



Ngā mauwha me ngā rākau o te takutai

Shrubs and coastal trees

Tauhinu | Cottonwood

Ozothamnus leptophyllus | Grows to 5 m high

Hardy grey-green shrub found on sandy and rocky coasts. Tolerates dry, windy conditions and provides cover for wildlife.



Houpara

Coastal five-finger

Pseudopanax lessonii | Grows to 6 m high

Glossy-leaved shrub ideal for coastal shelter. Hardy and fast-growing; responds well to pruning.



Kōwhai

Sophora chathamica | Grows to 20 m high

A coastal kōwhai, often found on cliff faces or banks overlooking estuarine rivers or inlets. Has a profusion of yellow flowers in late winter to spring.



Tips for success

- » Plant natives in autumn to reduce the need to water them and to allow roots to establish before summer.
- » Compost garden waste (including lawn clippings) instead of dumping it on dunes.
- » Remove invasive exotic plants and replace them with appropriate native plants.
- » Stick to tracks when accessing beaches to prevent trampling sensitive dune plants.
- » As a general rule, plants with silvery-coloured leaves tend to do well in coastal areas. For example, an exotic, non-invasive plant that is great for coastal hedges is feijoa.
- » Place taller plants upwind to buffer tender species from wind and salt.

A note on ecosourcing

Ecosourcing means using plants that come from the same local area where they will be planted. These plants are already adapted to the local soil, climate, and coastal conditions, making them more likely to thrive.

By choosing ecosourced native plants, you help protect local biodiversity, support native wildlife, and reduce the risk of introducing pests or diseases. Buy locally grown coastal natives from nurseries that collect seed from coastal areas in Northland.

Creating a wildlife haven

Your garden can do more than look good, it can actively help native wildlife

- » Plant pōhuehue for copper and common blue butterflies.
- » Plant sand coprosma and low groundcovers for skink and gecko shelter.
- » Leave deadwood and leaf litter in sheltered spots – insects and small reptiles use it.
- » Avoid spreading garden waste into nearby reserves as it often contains seeds of weedy plants.
- » Keep pet cats indoors to reduce predation on native wildlife.



Copper butterfly | *Lycaena species*



Common blue butterfly | *Zizina species*

Whai wāhi mai! Get involved



Join your local Coastcare group or community planting day. Working together helps protect larger stretches of coast and keeps dune systems healthy for everyone.



For more information coastcare@nrc.govt.nz or nrc.govt.nz/coastcare

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