



Trees 'n' Timber

Rimu

Dacrydium cupressinum

Helen and I have been touring New Zealand for the past month, prior to attending an Australasian meeting of the IWCS (International Wood Collectors Society) in Christchurch. We started in the North Island and were staggered by the number of Radiata Pine forests and timber jinkers carrying logs to ports for export. A huge industry, however I was more interested in looking for Rimu. I remember my early days of teaching when there was always some Rimu on the timber racks, but I have seen little of it in Australia since and was interested to follow up with information about the tree and the timber while in New Zealand. I probably saw it on the North Island but did not recognise the tree. However, on the South Island, and especially on the west coast it is very common and is a striking tree. I have also seen some beautiful turned pieces made from Rimu in Galleries.

Derivation of names

Dacrydium – from Greek dakrydion meaning a small tear, referring to the resin exuded from the plant.

There are about 15 species of the Genus *Dacrydium*, native to New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. Tasmania's Huon Pine was once known as *Dacrydium franklinii* and was only recently changed to its current name of *Lagarostrobos franklinii*. They are members of the southern conifer group, the podocarps.

cupressinum – resembling Cupressus an ancient Latin name for the Italian cypress trees.

Other Names

Red Pine, but this name has largely disappeared these days

The Tree.

Rimu (pronounced Remoo) is a tall erect evergreen conifer native only to the forests of New Zealand. It is a slow-growing tree, attaining a height of up to 50 metres with diameters of 1.5 metres, although these days trees are usually only 20 to 35 metres tall. There are historical accounts of 60 metre trees from dense forests near the town of National Park, to the west of Lake Taupo. Its lifespan is approximately 800 to 900 years.

Rimu bark has a distinctive appearance, with long thick flakes which are usually stringy and pimply. They readily slough off to protect the tree from other plants growing on the trunk, although in the wet rainforests many are covered with moss. The foliage has a similar appearance to Norfolk Island Pine, but much finer.

The leaves are spirally arranged, awl-shaped, up to 7 mm long by 1mm wide on juvenile plants, but only

2 to 3 mm long on mature trees. The leaves on juvenile plants are quite beautiful, with a graceful pendant habit, and a little softer than the hard spiky mature leaves. The pendant leaves make the tree quite obvious, even in a mixed forest. It is an attractive tree.



Young Rimu with beautiful pendant foliage!

Rimu is dioecious, with male and female cones on separate trees. The seeds take 15 months to mature after pollination. The mature cone is made up of a single (rarely two) dark seed/s 4 mm long, growing on the outside of a swollen red fleshy scale 6 to 10 mm long. The seeds are dispersed by birds which



Large Rimu trees

eat the fleshy scale and pass the seed on in their droppings.

Habitat.

Native to New Zealand only. Commonly in mixed broadleaf temperate rainforest, although there are almost pure stands (especially the west coast of the South Island).

Timber.

The heartwood varies in colour from dark reddish to yellowish brown, with irregular streaks which give it its unique rich toning and attractive appearance. The sapwood is a uniform pale brown. The heartwood and sapwood are separated by a drier intermediate band. The wood in this zone is a pale biscuit-brown colour, more even toned and slightly darker than the sapwood.

Rimu has barely discernible growth rings. The heartwood can be highly decorative with a close even texture, and is harder than the sapwood and is very stable. Fallen and sawn logs in the rain forest show very little sign of end checks. This is undoubtedly due to the high and consistent moisture content in the forest, and they show little effect of damage from fungal attack.

Main Uses

Up until the 1960's Rimu was extensively used for housing construction and later for flooring and furniture. This overuse depleted the once vast forests of Rimu and in the late 1990's the government banned



Bowl made from Rimu

the logging of Rimu from all public forests.

Sustainability of supply – All New Zealand indigenous timbers are now sourced only from privately owned forests, and the exploitation of these have many government controls. Limited supplies of Rimu are still available. It remains a popular timber for high quality furniture and for craftwork.

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