

Biodiversity in the Ashburton District

December 2011 Feature: Flowering Kanuka



As Christmas approaches, and images of snow covered trees start popping up, we might pause and consider our own trees with a sprinkling of white - the kanuka.

Many years ago, the Canterbury Plains were a mosaic of swamps and bogs, areas of higher fertility, stony river terraces and dry, infertile plains. Each contained a suite of plants adapted to those soil conditions, as well as being able to withstand harsh winter frosts and summer drought.

In more fertile areas large trees such as totara and matai would grow through kanuka shrublands, but on the driest, least fertile land, the largest trees were the kanuka, perhaps with some kowhai and cabbage trees.

Kanuka shrublands once have covered 250,000 ha on the Canterbury Plains, and today, kanuka remnants remain.

Kanuka grows easily in good conditions where it may reach a height of 5m. It makes an excellent shelter belt tree, needing little maintenance once established, and providing shelter for birds and sustenance for insects.

As a bonus, the kanuka flowers around Christmas time. We have our own distinct species of kanuka here in Ashburton. Why not celebrate our good fortune by planting one of our own special trees?