

Thinking Outside the Box — Taking a Look at Hedges in New Zealand[®]

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INTRODUCTION

The list of exotic weeds that have started out as hedges is horrendous, and there is a continuous battle to eradicate them. The use of native plants for hedging can only be recommended both for shelter and ornamentation in gardens. The ecological advantages for the environment are many fold — home and fruits for birds, lizards, insects, and soil enrichment.

The selection of New Zealand native plants has for some time been practiced in other countries — flax in Tristan de Cunha, *Metrosideros* in South Africa, *Pittosporum* in the United Kingdom and Europe, and I'm sure many other countries where most have become weeds.

Plants for hedging should be easily propagated in numbers, and while nearly all the native species grow from cuttings there are limited stocks of some, with seed produced sparsely and not at all some seasons. Thus hedge beds should be established. These are useful as trial beds, many of our trees and shrubs are only just now being tried in garden situations and if planted in the wrong place numbers may die or languish at best.

My pet hate is the widespread use of *Buxus* as a small hedge. It's dingy, stinks of tomcats, and gladly got a nasty rust which hopefully will get rid of it. Thankfully there are a number of species that can replace it.

NATIVE PLANTS FOR HEDGING

Corokia in various forms which incidentally have very nice flowers and fruits that visually are on par with the dreadful *Cotoneasters*, and not environmental thugs!

While some of the newer-coloured leaf forms go very well in schematic and theme gardens, they also outlive *Lavandula* in our humid climate growing as they do in dry, well drained poor soils.

Melicytus. The smaller species make an ideal substitute for *Buxus*, with bright green foliage on tight shrubs. They grow in dryish soils in semi-shade or sun, and take any amount of salt wind. Incidentally these have amazing flowers that you need to have a lens to see, followed by small white and purple spotted egg-like fruits which geckos and birds enjoy.

Myrsine. A number of smaller species such as *M. aquilonia* are becoming better known. A neat tidy bush, good bird food, and (dread the thought) could be clipped into tortuous topiary!

Muehlenbeckia. A few species are available for use. *Muehlenbeckia astonii*, a coastal plant rare in the wild now, is commonly used in gardens for its buxom, billowing bronze form. An amazing small hedge that has masses of fruits for birds and lizards is the only host species and food source for the copper butterfly. *Muehlen-*

beckia can be enriched with smaller *Clematis* growing through them. The smaller *Clematis* species are often found growing through various small shrubs in the wild and can lend a different dimension to a hedge that hasn't been used more, with the sweetly scented flowers and fluffy seedheads — a great feature.

***Plagianthus divaricatus*.** This is a hedge for saline conditions. It will grow roots in salty water or swamp edges and develops a thick impenetrable barrier.

***Coprosma*.** *Coprosma* contains a vast array of species large and not so large with a plant for every site. There are too many to pick from. Perhaps one for very soggy conditions in the sun is *C. propinqua*, a tight, upright shrub with small leaves and it hardly needs clipping. Some selections have sapphire-blue-coloured fruits. *Coprosma virescens* has orange twigs, pink twigs, and are amazing narrow shrubs that needs no trimming, and with no leaves, and short and tall forms!

***Pittosporum*.** This genus contains a huge range of hedge-like shrubs with many more to come. Some very rare ones are *P. obcordatum* with tiny foliage and scented flowers, and it needs no trimming. *Pittosporum turnerii* standing like a silver sentinel, is rare and needs no trimming. Both are quite different from the other hedging *Pittosporum* species.

***Hebe*.** They are not quite as long lived as some other hedge plants, at perhaps 10 years. They get gappy and need to be given a trim after flowering. There are lots of new ones with nice flower colours. Most do better with plenty of wind, even salt spray; they are good for quick effect and are great for bees.

***Alseuosmia*.** Here we have something for scent. *Alseuosmia* are medium-sized shrubs that will grow in very dark places, such as under trees, and can take dry or damp conditions. They have small, trumpet-shaped, highly perfumed flowers and are great as a small hedge around a seat. Quite a few small-flowered native shrubs are highly scented though not showy.

For the list of our native trees and shrubs that are suitable for hedges which has many permutations, wait for the sequel.