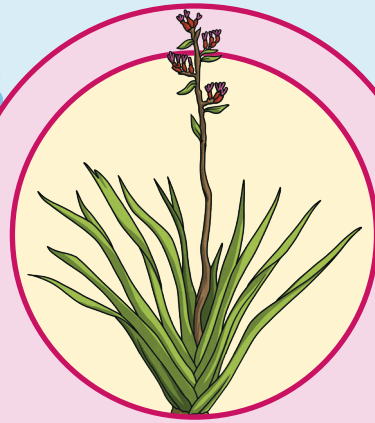


The History of Harakeke Use in Aotearoa



The History of Harakeke Use in Aotearoa

Harakeke (New Zealand flax) is one of our country's most distinctive native plants. Its benefits and uses are numerous, and its use is woven throughout the history of Aotearoa.

1250

Around 1250, the first Māori arrived in Aotearoa from Hawaiki and soon discovered the multiple benefits of harakeke. They used it to make sweet-tasting drinks, poultices for skin infections, disinfectants, laxatives, bandages and splints. Māori women wove baskets, containers and mats from the harakeke leaves. They learnt to get the strong fibre (muka) from the leaves by scraping the flesh away with a sharp shell. The muka was used to create fishing nets and traps, footwear, cords and ropes. Muka was often woven with feathers and dog skin to create warm clothing.

1700s

European explorers to New Zealand could see the potential in muka (flax fibre) as rope for rigging on their sailing ships. Rope was in high demand, and Māori began making flax ropes for visiting ships. They started trading fibre and weaving for European goods. Trading products and skills brought Māori and Europeans into close contact with each other for the first time.

1800s

The 1800s saw ups and downs in the flax industry in Aotearoa as many Māori began wearing European-style clothing, and weaving skills began to decline. Flax fibre was traded with Australia and then re-exported to Britain. Māori muka producers were paid with guns which escalated the tribal conflict into more violent encounters. Tribes began fighting to control the flax trade and supply of guns. This warring was one of the reasons the flax trade began to decline. Eventually, wool, timber, potatoes, grain, kauri gum, and whale oil became Aotearoa's main exports.

Hand-stripping of flax stopped due to the war between Māori and European settlers. Mechanical flax strippers were created; by 1870, there were 161 flax mills across

The History of Harakeke Use in Aotearoa

Aotearoa. Weaving skills began to fade, and missionaries discouraged young women from learning to weave. Near the end of the century, ethnographer Elsdon Best authored a book called, 'The Art of The Whare Pora', which described the introduction of young Māori wāhine to the customs and rituals surrounding every part of the weaving process.

1900s

The 1900s saw huge strides in the flax industry and the art of weaving. Aotearoa's largest flax mill, Miranui, was built, which, at its peak, had seven stripping machines and employed 300 people. The government restricted imported woolpacks made from Indian Jute, allowing the survival of muka manufacturing and allowing for the opening of more factories. The government also purchased Moutoa Swamp during World War II as an experimental flax plantation to supply farmers and the military with fibre. Post-war, government restrictions on importing fibres also helped the flax industry. However, in the 1970s, import restrictions were lifted, bringing the competition of imported and synthetic fibres, leading to the end of the flax industry and the closing of the last flax mill in 1985.

Rene Orchiston spent 30 years travelling the country, collecting, growing, sharing and recording knowledge about flax and its uses. She later gifted her collection to the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) to form the basis of a national collection. This collection was later taken over by Manaaki Whenua (Landcare Research).

Rangimārie Hetet hosted a hui to promote whāriki making and other weaving traditions. Her daughter, Diggeress Te Kanawa, attended this hui and went on to spend 50 years promoting and encouraging the revival of Māori weaving. This included forming a group called 'Aotearoa Moananui a Kiwa Weavers' whose goal was to share resources and knowledge about weaving.

2000s

The 2000s have been a time of renewal for the flax industry. Flax and woven products have been the focus of much research, such as investigating ways to improve the strength of flax fibres by mixing them with other fibres, promoting environmental and commercial benefits of flax, investigating methods of softening muka to make it fine enough to be used by the fashion industry, and the recommendation to provide whānau with a flax-woven safe sleeping basket for newborns.

The History of Harakeke Use in Aotearoa

The first major Māori weaving exhibition occurred across Aotearoa and North America. This exhibition showed the spiritual significance of weaving and featured the works of more than 40 leading Māori weavers. Its final show attracted 81,000 visitors.

Harakeke and the muka taken from its leaves have been an important part of Māori life since they arrived in Aotearoa and continue to be so today. The future of the flax industry in New Zealand is bright.



Questions

1. Draw five lines and match each century to its events.

1250

1700s

1800s

1900s

2000s

There were 161 flax mills across Aotearoa.

The last flax mill closed.

The arrival of the first Māori settlers from Hawaiki.

There has been much research into flax's environmental and commercial benefits.

Māori began trading rope made from muka with European explorers.

2. What is the Māori name for the fibre gathered from flax leaves? Tick one.

- Kauri
- Muka
- Aute
- Harakeke

3. In what century did Māori muka producers get paid with guns for their labour?

4. In what decade were there 161 flax mills across Aotearoa?

5. Fill in the missing words.

They learnt to get the strong _____ (muka) from the leaves by scraping the flesh away with a _____ shell.

6. Do you think it was fair that Māori workers were paid in items, not cash, for their work? Explain why you think that.

7. Explain why there aren't more precise dates for events between 1250 and 1769.

8. Why do you think a collection of flax species, such as the Orchiston collection, is so important?

9. What do you think the future holds for muka production and weaving?

10. Summarise what you have learned about the history of harakeke in Aotearoa using 25 words or less.
