



Gentian, Mt Holdsworth

Photo: David Gregorie

or your woollen jersey — insulating the plant from the cold air.

Other plants have small, spiky or leathery leaves that reduce the amount of water flowing through the plant and evaporating into the air. South Island “vegetable sheep” plants are so compact and tucked in on themselves and so well insulated that they look rather like giant puffballs. The North Island vegetable sheep is smaller and greyish-green in colour. It doesn't look much like a sheep but you can see it is the same sort of plant.

If you like flowers and you are reasonably fit you will find a climb up above the tree line to the snow tussock a great experience. You will be surprised and delighted by the different kinds of shrubs and herbs that grow there — more than 300 different species.

You will need boots, a day pack, warm clothing including a parka, a woollen shirt, a warm jersey, long trousers in case the weather turns nasty, and food for two days in case you have to shelter overnight in a mountain hut. You will also need an experienced adult companion. The mountains are no place for the ignorant or the unprepared.

The plant you will most likely be looking for is the edelweiss and fortunately it is quite easy to spot — a small silvery grey plant with creamy white flowers with yellow centres.

You will find many kinds of buttercups ranging in size from tiny well hidden species to the giant *Ranunculus lyalli*, the famous white buttercup of the South Island. You would also amuse yourself seeing how many of the 50-odd different species of alpine daisies you can find.

You will have no trouble spotting a vegetable sheep, which are too big to miss, or the spaniard, which you should miss if you can. It is large, sharp, spiky and extremely uncomfortable if you

blunder into it.

The woody plants will also catch your eye. Shrubs and small trees often have colourful berries or fruit that stand out against the grey-brown background. Mountain coprosmas have blue, white, red or orange berries, snow totaras have bright red drupes, while the heaths have fruit ranging in colour from white through red to purple.

But it is the small flowers that make a climb into the mountains so worthwhile — the gentians, eyebrights and harebells look so delicate that it is hard to believe they survive in such harsh conditions.

It may seem strange that so many of our alpine plants have such attractive flowers and berries, but there is a good reason for it. With such a short growing season the plants need as much help as they can get to have their seeds pollinated and spread around before the cold weather returns. Flowers are bright and eye-catching to attract the insects that carry pollen from flower to flower as they search for nectar. The insects too must mate and lay their eggs before the frosts kill them off.

The shrubs have colourful berries to attract the birds they rely on to spread their seeds. The birds eat the berries and the seeds pass unharmed through bird's gut so that they have some chance of landing on a place where they might grow.

New Zealand's alpine plants are precious. More than 90 percent of them are found nowhere else in the world and we have a responsibility to see that they are preserved. They are in some danger from the grazing animals that have been brought to New Zealand for sportsmen to shoot — tahr, chamois and red deer range across a great deal of the South Island high country and unfortunately these animals and domestic cattle and sheep like to eat our mountain plants.

North Island edelweiss

Photo: David Gregorie



Vegetable sheep (*Raoulia rubra*)

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Spaniard, Mt Holdsworth

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