

## Harakeke – The Rene Orchiston Collection

FOR RENE ORCHISTON, each of the 60 varieties of flax she has collected over the last 30 years are personal friends. Tending each bush, she is reminded of the place where it grew, the person who donated it and the story that accompanied it.

She tells, for example, of walking in the high country and coming across an old Maori campsite. Three tired looking bushes of harakeke were lying in the sun with their roots exposed, dug up by pigs. Rene replaced them after taking a small piece from a rare variegated variety which she had not seen elsewhere. It was later identified by a Whakatane woman as Motu-o-nui. The other two bushes were Oue and the yellow striped Parekoretawa. As harakeke was not indigenous to the area, Rene knew any to be found would be of high quality, since it had to be carried there on the backs of travellers.

Rene, a Forest and Bird member from Gisborne, first started the flax collection after observing that many fine craftswomen in her area were using inferior material for their weaving – owing to an extreme shortage of the special varieties needed for different types of articles. She was saddened to note the lack of interest in aspects of Maori culture such as flax weaving among middleaged and younger folk. Special flax bushes had been neglected and had even died out in many areas.

Realising that in years to come there was likely to be a revival of interest in traditional arts and crafts, Rene visited many marae and individuals around the country, talking to elderly weavers and carefully recording information on names and uses of their special flaxes. Small plants would be exchanged for a different kind of flax or for the fruit and honey which Rene always carried in the car. She also investigated areas where early records suggested particular varieties had been grown, and found occasional remnants. Gradually a collection of some 60 of the most desirable varieties of harakeke and some wharariki was built up and looked after by Rene at her home.

As part of the Maori cultural renaissance there is now renewed enthusiasm for traditional crafts and Rene has received many requests from all over New Zealand for superior types of flax. Flaxes such as the tall, heavy duty Tihore types with fibres so strong that they can be drawn out easily into long strands; the short, straight, strong flax which strips easily and is used in piupiu making; the very long, bendy types for whariki and kete; and the long, blackedged, slightly droopy bluegreen flax which can produce long ribbons of soft fibre with the beauty and lustre of silk. As the bushes have grown and multiplied thousands of plants of these special varieties have been donated to marae, community colleges and schools throughout the country.

New Zealand flaxes are not 'true' flaxes – though their fibre is similar – but are endemic to New Zealand and belong in their own family Phormiaceae. Plants are highly vari-



Rene Orchiston and David Bellamy among flaxes at Mrs Orchiston's Gisborne home.

able in their characteristics. Botanists recognise two species: *Phormium tenax*, lowland or swamp flax; and *Phormium cookianum*, coastal or mountain flax. The Maori name for *P. cookianum* is wharariki. Its soft, droopy leaves are not commonly used today. Within *P. tenax* however, known as harakeke, are many dozens of different entities, each with its own characteristics, its own specific uses, and its own name.

Varieties (or more strictly speaking, cultivars) were selected by Maori, probably over centuries, for their particular qualities such as

strength, softness, durability, colour and quantity of fibre. They were cultivated and exchanged. However, since European arrival, there has been a loss of knowledge concerning particular varieties and their uses, and it is only due to the vision and determination of a few individual people such as Rene Orchiston that the knowledge and plants that exist now have been retained. ✎

**Sue Scheele and Geoff Walls**