



# Kanuka and Manuka

**CHRIS WARD examines the many values of these common plants.**

**K**anuka and manuka are the stuff of controversy. Are they farmland weeds, or valuable resources? Is that hillside covered with scrub, or forest? Is it a precious example of native biodiversity and natural character, or simply a wasteland? For that matter, some layfolk will argue there's no such thing as kanuka, only manuka.

Though frequently look-alikes, and often confused with each other, there are major differences between kanuka and manuka. (Details in box). Both trees can adapt their forms according to the growing conditions. Kanuka and manuka may look much the same, but often the differences are obvious, even from a distance.

Until about 20 years ago, kanuka and manuka were both identified as closely related species in the genus *Leptospermum*. Then, fundamental differences, especially in the flowers and seed capsules, led Australian botanists to reclassify them in different genera. *Kunzea ericoides* is the new scientific name for kanuka while *Leptospermum sco-*

*parium* remains the name for manuka.

We might feel aggrieved at the Aussies fiddling with the names of New Zealand species in this way, but in fact kanuka and manuka are also native to Australia. Could this be the origin of the widespread misunderstanding that kanuka and manuka aren't New Zealand natives? How often have I heard something like 'Oh, we're only cutting scrub, we wouldn't touch the native!' — implying the 'scrub' (kanuka-manuka) isn't native. Far from it; both were present well back in New Zealand's geological past.

That word 'scrub' — it can be used with the emphasis of a four-letter word to suggest the 'weed' status of a vegetation, its illegitimacy and lack of value, indeed its negative value. For that reason, many conservation-focused people avoid using the word. But 'scrub' is also a straightforward technical term for closed-canopy woody vegetation dominated by stems less than 10 centimetres diameter, a purely descriptive term without any judgmental implications.

'Shrubland' is an alternative word sometimes used instead of 'scrub' by people concerned with its negative connotations. But technically, shrubland is another form of vegetation — essentially scrub with an open canopy, where shrub cover is less than 80 percent. On this basis, there is plenty of both scrub and shrubland dominated by kanuka and manuka in many parts of New Zealand.

Much of the vegetation that is commonly referred to as scrub is, however, technically forest. Scrub becomes forest when the dominant stems forming the canopy are more than 10 centimetres diameter at breast height. For kanuka this normally occurs when the stand is about 30 years old, at which time it is typically 8-12 metres tall. These are small trees, agreed, but kanuka will keep on growing to a large size if not felled or burnt.

Many of us will know a corner with some large 'old man' kanuka. My favourite is on the high marine terrace surface of Whetumatarau, a dramatic plateau imme-