

Lord Howe Island

Plant Life



Mountain Rose
Metrosideros Nervulosa

The large number of unique plants in such a small area, in such isolation was a primary factor in considering Lord Howe Island for World Heritage listing in 1982. The Island has a large number of rare and endemic plants, associated with diverse neighbouring land areas in a relatively undisturbed state.

Following the volcanic eruptions that formed Lord Howe Island 7 million years ago, plants from faraway neighbours in many directions began to colonise its shores. Located as it is in the central Tasman Sea, the Island flora contains elements from Australia, New Zealand, New Caledonia and, to a lesser extent, some Pacific islands.

When sea levels were lower, there were other Islands in the Tasman Sea which served as stepping stones to aid in plants reaching Lord Howe Island, thus plants were more easily able to colonise from neighbouring landmasses. Birds, wind and water brought seeds of various plants to the Island.

With rise in sea levels, some of these plants were cut off from their parents and slowly evolved into new species - over one third of the native vascular plant species are unique to the Island.

The complex pattern of valleys, ridges and mountains that developed on the Island as a result of weathering has provided many microhabitats for different plant communities to grow and flourish - from tall rainforest to stunted scrub and epiphytes clinging to windswept cliffs. Lord Howe Island is perhaps unique amongst small oceanic islands in that its mountains have sufficient altitude to allow the development of a true mist forest on their summits, particularly Mt Gower.

Some of the more conspicuous Island plants to be seen are:

Palms - there are four endemic palm species on Lord Howe Island. Two species occur on the lowlands, often in dense stands. The Thatch Palm *Howea forsteriana* (see right) has been the world's most popular indoor palm for 120 years, and each year the seeds are harvested by the Islanders for planting to grow new palms for export. Also growing on the lowlands and a little higher are the Curly Palms *Howea belmoreana*. Higher in the mountains, from 400 metres to the summits are found Big Mountain Palms *Hedyscepe canterburyana* with seeds the size of a golf ball, and then only on the summits are found the Little Mountain Palms *Lepidorrhachis mooreana* which have fruit the size of a marble.

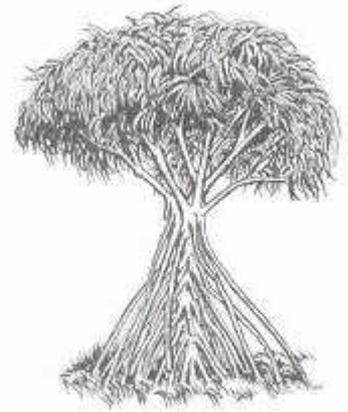


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The Banyan Tree *Ficus macrophylla* ssp. *columnaris* with its numerous bunks is one of the most noticeable trees around the lowlands - its huge size and habit of dropping aerial roots

which form new bunks make it a fascinating sight. Some excellent examples of the Banyan Tree can be seen near Ned's Beach or the track to Clear Place.

The Pandanus Tree *Pandanus forsteri*, with its many prop roots several metres high, forming a teepee structure, can be found along creek beds and soaks of the Island, with the best examples along the Boat Harbour track. The Pandanus has long tough leaves that are used to weave durable baskets. At certain times of the year, some trees bear the large orange fruit which has similar size and outside structure to that of a pineapple.



Pandanus Tree Pandanus forsteri

Orchids - there are ten species of orchids on Lord Howe Island. The most conspicuous is the Bush Orchid *Dendrobium macropus*, growing as an epiphyte on the trees and rocks of the lowlands and sprouting its creamy flowers in August and September. Higher up, in the mountains, the other *Dendrobium* of the Island is the endemic *Dendrobium moorei* with delicate white flowers at most times of the year. Other orchids are smaller, rarer and thus less conspicuous. Most are terrestrial orchids that only have flowers for a short time.

Ferns - with its moist maritime climate, Lord Howe Island is home to 57 species of ferns, including four Tree Fern species, all four being endemic, from the genus *Cyathea*. The ferns are mainly found growing around the southern mountains where the microclimate is moister. Ferns are especially profuse on the summit of Mount Gower where every available tree hunk and rock is covered in mosses and ferns.

Flowers - In summer the mountains slopes are dotted with colourful flowers ? the bright red spiky Mountain Rose *Metrosideros nervulosa* and *M sclerocarpa*; white flower spikes of the Fitzgeraldii Tree *Dracophyllum fitzgeraldii*. Higher up can be seen the orange fleshy flowers of the Pumpkin Tree *Negria rhabdothamnoides* and masses of tiny yellow flowers of the Corokia *Corokia carpoetoides* bushes.

Fruits - Some of the Island plants have colourful fruits such as the red berries of the Berrywood Tree *Ochrosia elliptica*, or the orange berries of the Christmas Bush *Alyxia ruscifolia*. Some have a name suggesting they are edible - Green Plum *Atractocarpus stipularis* Blue Plum *Chionanthus quadristamineus*, Black Grape *Psychotria carronis* and Island Apple *Dysoxylon pachyphyllum*, however they are not edible but the fruits resemble edible European fruits in appearance.

One of Lord Howe Islands most attractive plants is the Wedding Lily *Dietes robinsoniana*. Its large white flowers with yellow markings bloom from June to November. Its world distribution intrigues scientists - it has relatives found only in southern Africa. Today only 10 percent of the Island vegetation is cleared, and a further 10 to 15 percent disturbed. Most of the forests are protected in the Permanent Park Preserve. Although man has brought pests in the form of weeds and feral goats, the Lord Howe Island Board, together with funding from the Commonwealth Government is making progress in eradicating these threats to the Island flora.



*Wedding Lily
Dietes robinsoniana*