

# Biodiversity



Number 29

## Ngaio (*Myoporum laetum*)

### DESCRIPTION

Ngaio is a small, fast-growing tree that grows to a height of about 10m and forms a spreading canopy with a stout trunk up to 30cm in diameter. It is a very hardy plant that is drought, salt and wind tolerant.

Ngaio's leaves are bright green and fleshy. They are simple, with small marginal teeth towards their tips, and are alternately arranged along the stem. Other key characteristics include oil glands dotted over the leaves. These are very visible, especially when held up to light. Young leaves and branch tips are dark brown or black, and sticky.

Small clusters of two to six white flowers with purple spots are produced in the leaf axils from mid-spring to mid-summer. Small, round, pale to dark magenta fruits appear from summer to early winter.

### DISTRIBUTION

Ngaio is endemic to New Zealand. It grows naturally on the Three Kings Islands, and in the North and South Islands as far south as Otago. It also grows in the Chatham Islands, where it was probably introduced.

A hardy plant that typically grows in coastal and lowland forest, its range extends well inland in

parts of Hawke's Bay, Rangitaiki and Wairarapa. It is reasonably uncommon through most of its natural range.

Ngaio is often found in exposed coastal situations, where its broad canopy provides shade and protection for other species to develop beneath.



### NGAIO IN TARANAKI

Ngaio is relatively uncommon in Taranaki. Naturally it has been recorded along the coast from Mohakatino in the north to south of Okato, on the Kaitake Range up to a height of 300m, and inland from Hawera. The New Plymouth District Council has used ngaio in many of its coastal plantings, some of them now about 20 years old. It has used ngaio as a 'nurse' plant for coastal re-vegetation and for shelter in recreational areas. There are some good examples at Onaero Beach.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP

- When planting ngaio, ensure it is eco-sourced to preserve our local form.
- Avoid planting the Australian form Tasmanian boobialla (*Myoporum insulare*) near environmental areas, as it hybridizes with ngaio.



Exotic Tasmanian boobialla on the left and the native ngaio on the right.

### CONSERVATION

Ngaio is not a threatened or endangered plant. It is recognized as being regionally uncommon in the Taranaki region.

### THREATS

- Genetic pollution – widespread planting of Tasmanian boobialla (*Myoporum insulare*) has occurred in some coastal areas. This plant hybridises with ngaio (*Myoporum laetum*).
- Coastal development.
- Coastal erosion.

### QUICK FACTS

- Maori used the juice from the leaves as an insect repellent to repel sand flies and mosquitoes.
- Ngaio was used medicinally by Maori for toothache, skin complaints.
- The leaves of this tree contain a liver toxin, ngaione, which can cause sickness and/or death in stock such as horses, cattle, sheep and pigs.

