

## Phormium species

### Propagation

The seed is best sown as soon as it is ripe although seed remains viable for about 12 months in normal storage. Germination is sometimes poor but should take place in 1 - 6 months at 15°C. Seed germination is promoted by cold treatment – place the seed in a sealed plastic bag in the crisper section of your refrigerator for 6 to eight weeks prior to sowing. The seedlings can be variable. When they are large enough to handle, prick the seedlings out into individual pots and grow them on in some shelter for at least their first Winter. Plant them out into their permanent positions in late spring or early summer, after the last expected frosts. Division in spring as growth commences which is very easy, larger divisions can be planted out direct into their permanent positions. We have found that it is better to pot up the smaller divisions and grow them on in light shade in a cold frame until they are well established before planting them out in late spring or early summer.

Cultivation Notes: Prefers a rich loamy soil but is not too fussy, succeeding in peaty soils and in boggy moorland. Tolerates light shade but prefers full sun and plants can be grown in quite coarse grass, which can be cut annually in the Autumn. Prefers a sheltered position but tolerates maritime exposure. Plants tolerate occasional flooding with saline water and can withstand temperatures down to about -11°C, but they can be killed in very severe winters in the northern hemisphere. Members of this genus are rarely if ever troubled by browsing deer or rabbits.

New Zealand Flax (*Phormium* spp.) are large strap-leaved evergreen perennials that for many years were placed in the Agave family (Agavaceae) - Current taxonomic treatment has recently created the family Phormiaceae into which *Phormium* and *Dianella* have been placed. *Phormium tenax*, the Coastal Flax, is the larger and more common plant in cultivation; its long strap leaves in shades of green, bronze and maroon are a familiar sight.

### Cultural Notes

Cultural practices for the flax hybrids are similar to those for the species with a few exceptions. As a general rule the hybrid flax are not as durable as *Phormium tenax* and are usually less tolerant to extremely hot or cold temperatures, prolonged dry conditions and heavy soil. Plants look much better with occasional irrigation but can survive extensive periods without it; once, we let a planting go the entire summer without watering and the plants remained healthy. If possible, position plants on a slope or mound in heavier soils where drainage is poor. *Phormium* plants suffer from few other maladies. Occasional long tailed mealy bug attacks can be controlled through

sprays, and snails that often use the underside of the leaves for an abode can be easily picked off. The most serious pest we have seen on New Zealand Flax is the New Zealand Flax Mealybug (*Balanococcus diminutus*). An infestation of this pest threatens the long term health of the plant. As with other mealy bugs, remove with soapy water.

