



# The Herb Society of America

## Promising Plants Profiles

### ***Phormium tenax***

**Genus:** *Phormium*  
**Specific Epithet:** *tenax*  
**Common Name:** New Zealand flax  
**Family:** Agavaceae

**Flower Color:** red  
**Form:** perennial  
**Hardiness Zone:** 8-10  
**Height:** 4-10'  
**Soil:** moist but well-drained soil  
**Sun:** full sun to light shade

**Uses:** culinary, fiber, ornamental



*Phormium tenax* 'Purpureum'

Native to New Zealand, *Phormium* species were used by the New Zealand Maori peoples as a source of fiber for weaving into cord, rope, baskets, and clothing. They were first brought to Europe by Sir Joseph Banks, who noticed them while on Captain Cook's first voyage.

*Phormium tenax* can grow to 9 or 10 feet tall under ideal conditions, but in most gardens it will not grow more than 4 feet. It is possible for it to reach its growth potential in mild climates of North America. *Phormium cookianum* (syn. *P. colensoi*) is a smaller, related species reaching to only 7 feet. There are many cultivars of both species and hybrids are also available. One source boasts seventy cultivars, but most sources list twenty to thirty. Although the straight species of *Phormium* are a rich green, the cultivars come in a broad range of color shades, from red, orange, yellow, pink and cream, or a combination of those colors. Specimens of *Phormium tenax* 'Purpureum,' *Phormium* 'Hilo Princess,' and *Phormium* 'Yellow Wave' are growing in the National Herb Garden in Washington, D.C. The older plants grow to about 4 feet in a container, the younger plants to about 2 feet.

New Zealand flax makes a wonderful focal point or accent in the garden. Grow in any well-drained good garden soil with full sun to very light shade. Their long strap-like leaves make a dramatic statement in any garden. *Phormium* make wonderful container plants and easily overwinter in a cool room with a lot of light. Outdoors, they have not been tried much outside mild areas in the west and south, however the plant has potential in many more zones than originally thought. Some cultivars are hardier than others and should be garden-tested in a broader area, perhaps into the mid-upper south. *Phormium tenax* 'Purpureum' has been hardy at the National Herb Garden for several mild winters, but had a lot of dieback in the wet, cold winter of 2002-2003. Good drainage is a key element to winter survival in colder climates. – James Adams, Curator of the National Herb Garden, Promising Plants Presentation, 2003