



GuideLines

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Tēnā koutou katoa

(Greetings, hello to you all)

Flora News

By Warren Brewer

Two tolerated weeds on Tiritiri are now earning their keep by providing fruit for the birds in autumn.

Inkweed (*Phytolacca octandra*) forms a spreading or mainly erect small shrub. Dense clusters of tiny green flowers are open on cylindrical spikes.



Inkweed spike
with tiny white
flowers

When new green fruit has matured these spikes bear glossy black berries containing a deep purple juice. Many of Tiritiri Matangi's birds feed off them.

Inkweed – ripe berries
have been harvested
from spikes



Inkweed is native to Central and South America. The genus *Phytolacca* has about 30 species of perennial herbs, shrubs and trees. The plants have herbaceous ancestors and the shrubs and trees in the genus have trunks consisting of abnormal thickening rather than true wood. All the species have berries which are green at first then ripening to a dark purple to black. They are found in North, Central and South America and belong in the pokeweed family, *Phytolaccaceae*.

Also in NZ is the **ombu tree** (*Phytolacca dioica*). This tree-like plant from the pampas of South America provides shade in open grassland. It has a massive buttressed base to its trunk which is formed from very soft wood having a high water storage capacity. These trees are very resistant to grass fires and drought. The trees are dioecious (*dioica*). A fine example can be seen in Albert Park and other Auckland urban reserves.



Ombu tree in Albert Park

Ombu means beautiful shade.

Phytolacca means plant with a red dye (juice from the berries).

Black nightshade (*Solanum nigrum*), our second tolerated weed, is believed to have been naturalised in NZ as early as 1853. Its long NZ association has been rewarded

with the Māori name raupeti and notes (1870) describe its tops being used as a vegetable. Even earlier are records of the ripe black berries being eaten by Māori.

Black nightshade
with edible green
tops and ripe
black berries



Originally from Europe and Asia, black nightshade is an annual or short lived perennial. Clusters of small white flowers occur in summer and autumn. The small berries formed are initially green, ripening to black.