

Flora News

By Warren Brewer

Kawakawa and the pepper family - Part Two.

The familiar condiment **pepper** (*Piper nigrum*) is a climbing vine, native to Southern India, but now also widely planted in Asia. Its small flowers develop on pendulous spikes, forming small fruits. When dried the kernels of the fruits are known as peppercorns.



White pepper

From the South Pacific, **kava** (*Piper methysticum*) has larger leaves than kawakawa. It is a sterile cultivar, propagated from stem cuttings. The stimulating, analgesic drink kava is made from powdered root material. Methysticum means intoxicating. The gem stone amethyst comes from Greek for “not drunken”, the wearing of this jewel being supposed to prevent intoxication.



Kava bush (left) and showing sterile flower spike (right)

On Tiritiri Matangi there is another member of the pepper family, **peperomia** (*Peperomia urvilleana*). It is a perennial herb which prefers to grow in shade or semi shade on rocky cliff faces. Its fleshy oval leaves store water in a transparent upper layer. The plant's flowers are minute, perfect and densely packed on slender spikes. As fruit ripens small black seeds form which are covered in a sticky residue to aid their dispersal.



Peperomia is a large genus with species mostly found in tropical South America and Southern Asia. Many of the species are used as house plants or, in warmer areas, garden plants. Our peperomia plant is a native as examples are also present on Norfolk and Lord Howe Islands.

Peperomia comes from Greek, "resembling pepper."

Urvilleana honours Dumont d'Urville, French naval officer, explorer and botanist, commander of the *Astrolabe* which visited coastal northern New Zealand in 1827. Also serving on *Astrolabe* was Pierre Adolphe Lesson, surgeon/botanist after whom **houpara** (*Pseudopanax lesson*) was named.