

Karaka

Corynocarpus laevigatus J. R. & G. Forst.

Karaka family (Corynocarpaceae)

Post-Cook introduction

Medium-sized evergreen ornamental introduced tree with large elliptical leaves, small whitish flowers, and orange plumlike edible fruit with very poisonous seed. Tree 20–50 ft (6–15 m) tall, with trunk to 2 ft (0.6 m) in diameter, with rounded crown often flowering as a shrub. Bark on small trunks gray, smoothish. Inner bark whitish, slightly bitter. Twigs stout, hairless, with raised half-round leaf scars.

Leaves alternate, hairless, with short stout leafstalks $\frac{3}{8}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$ inch (1–2 cm) long. Blades elliptical, $3\frac{1}{2}$ –6 inches (9–15 cm) long and $1\frac{1}{4}$ – $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches (3–6 cm), wide, rounded or blunt at apex, short- to long-pointed at base, not toothed, thick and leathery, above shiny dark green with inconspicuous veins, beneath dull and paler.

Flower clusters (panicles) terminal, branched, 3–4 inches (7.5–10 cm) long. Flowers many in groups of 3, short-stalked, greenish, small, about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch (6 mm) wide, composed of five rounded sepals, corolla of five elliptical finely-toothed petals united at base, five short stamens attached at base of corolla and opposite petals, five lobes (staminodia) between stamens, and pistil with single-celled ovary, narrow style, and dot stigma.

Fruit (drupe), elliptical, often unequal sided, 1– $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches (2.5–4 cm) long, rarely to $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches (6 cm), hairless, shiny, turning from dark green to yellow to orange, fleshy. Seed single, large, very bitter and very poisonous.

The sweetish fruit is reported to be edible, but the seed is very poisonous, containing a cyanogenic glucoside, corynocarpin. It is recorded that the Maoris of New Zealand ate the starchy seeds after long cooking and soaking in salt water.

A handsome ornamental or park tree. Grown also in southern California.

Scattered and naturalized in moist soils in the islands. Introduced before 1891 in Kokee region of Kauai and established there. Brought to Molokai before 1912. Afterwards seeds were distributed to other islands. Wild hogs spread the seeds also.

Karaka is common only on Kauai, where the Division of Forestry planted almost 5000 trees between 1925

and 1937. It is spreading rapidly and is expected to become a noxious weed in the future. On Molokai, it is presently confined to one small patch and will likely be eradicated before it spreads.

Special area

Kokee

Range

Native of New Zealand

Other common names

karakanut, New Zealand karakanut, karaka-tree

The genus has about five species in the southwestern Pacific region from New Guinea to Australia (Queensland) and New Zealand, New Hebrides, and New Caledonia. It is placed alone in its family, which is probably related to the cashew family (Anacardiaceae). The descriptive generic name is Greek meaning “club and fruit.”



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Flowering twig, 1/2 X; corolla with stamens
(lower right), 3 X (Degener).