



RED BEECH (*Nothofagus fusca*)

New Zealand has five evergreen types of beech but these are not found naturally on Mt Taranaki or on Stewart Island. Red beech reach heights of 30 to 40 metres with trunk diameters of up to 3 metres. This is the largest of the New Zealand beeches.

Red beech grow in high country and lowland deep fertile soils, and are found mainly from East Cape down the mountain spine of the North Island, in the north-west and south-east of the South Island, and between Lakes Te Anau and Wakatipu.

When young the red beech tree has a trunk covered by a smooth, whitish bark, which in older trees becomes grey and deeply furrowed. Mature trees often have flanged bases with root buttresses. The leaves are up to 40mm long and 25mm wide, sharp-toothed, and bright green turning red before they fall.

Red beech wood is slow and notoriously difficult to dry, but once dry is very stable, strong and durable. It varies from light brown to red-brown. Sapwood is lighter in colour and heartwood can be cherry red. Early European uses included it as a structural utility timber, especially in the Westland goldfields, mining, railway sleepers, bridge and decking timbers, fence posts, general building construction, and furniture. It is even, close textured and very easily worked, having very good machining, hand-tool working, turning, finishing, and wearing properties.

Red beech is a favourite wood for woodturners because of its colour, density, and character. Especially favoured is red beech burr wood which is commonly rich cherry red in colour with birds-eye markings, and also more wavy-grained wood from the base of the tree. These types of wood are valued for decorative work because of their interesting grain patterns and colour. It sands to a high lustre and takes finishes well so it is popular for more artistic pieces. Red beech driftwood found around some river mouths and along some beaches is challenging but rewarding to turn.

Possible health risks: none known

Density 630 kg/m³



*The largest of the New Zealand beeches.
Photo: J.L.Kendrick, DOC*

