



MANUKA

BY DR. W. R. B. OLIVER

CONSIDERED TO be the most useful member of the flora for the warmth-giving quality of its wood, for its use for brushwood shelters, repairing muddy roads, and for numerous other purposes; sometimes reviled for its aggressiveness in quickly occupying cleared land; yet loved by all as a true New-Zealander, the manuka, if not the accepted national flower, is in fact a national emblem, as it is the most widely distributed and consequently the most characteristic New Zealand tree.

The manuka belongs to the Myrtle family, which contains many kinds of trees and shrubs with conspicuous flowers. Often, as in the eucalypts and ratas, it is the stamens that give character to the flower, the petals being inconspicuous; but in the manuka it is the corolla that mainly contributes to the masses of white, pink, or even crimson flowers that cover the bushes through more than one season of the year.

On good soil the manuka grows into a fair-sized tree; but it tolerates almost any situation. Sand-dunes, poor clay soils, arid swamps, steam-heated ground, and pumice soils are all occupied by this adaptable species. But its size diminishes as conditions become unfavourable, and in some situations manuka plants reach only a few inches in height. Nevertheless, they flower profusely and reproduce their kind no matter how inhospitable the surroundings.

The wood of the manuka is extremely hard and hence takes a high polish. It is reddish-brown in colour, but on account

of the small size of the trunk can be used only for such things as handles. It was indeed greatly valued by the Maoris for making their ceremonial staffs or *taiaha*. Larger-sized timber is obtained from the manuka's close relative, the kanuka or "white" tea-tree. The medicinal properties of infusions of the leaves and bark of the manuka were known to the Maoris. By the early settlers manuka leaves sometimes were used as a substitute for tea.

