

FOREST & BIRD

Ata Rangi Vineyard owner Clive Paton was looking for land to grow more grapes, about six years ago. What he found instead fuelled a passion just as crimson red as his famous pinot noir. When the real estate agent showed Clive some land at Waihora, just south of Martinborough, he fell in love with the native bush on the property.

And since then the romance has yielded new discoveries: not long after Clive bought the land a friend found a stand of northern rata – “few and far between in Wairarapa” - growing in the bush.

Somehow more than 70 mature rata on what Clive now calls Rata Ridge had survived widespread burn-offs in the 1880s and continued to thrive.

Three years ago, with the help of Project Crimson, Clive began propagating seedlings from the rata on his property, and hopes that eventually South Wairarapa will again be ablaze with its crimson flowers.

It's a slow process, as rata is not easy to propagate from cuttings, and flowering (and therefore seed production) varies greatly from year to year. Clive wants to grow new plants that are eco-sourced from cuttings and seed from the originals, rather than source them from outside the area. So far he has just 60 seedlings to plant out, and he hopes to grow about 1000.



Being a winemaker can come in handy when planting trees – each rata Clive plants out is topped up with compost made from grape skins, and protected by a half wine barrel.

“If any of us live long enough to see it, it will be a magnificent sight,” Clive tells fellow Forest & Bird members helping plant out twenty rata in early September.

“The things that go on here are of course for the next generation – hopefully my children and their children will appreciate it.”

As well as planting rata, Clive has covenanted 45 ha and has fenced off areas of native bush on the property, and has got together with neighbouring land-owners to form Waihora Watch, which combines their conservation efforts. Predator control by Greater Wellington Regional Council has helped recovery of both native plants and wildlife – in the last two and a half years trapping and poisoning has made serious in-roads on local possum numbers and has taken out more than 1000 rats, and smaller numbers of stoats, ferrets and feral cats.



Ata Rangi is also helping northern rata off the property. The vineyard's second label pinot noir is named Crimson and a percentage of the profits go towards Project Crimson projects in the Wellington region, including the planting of Tinakori Hill with northern rata.

More widely known for helping save pohutukawa, Project Crimson is now focused on a similar rescue mission for its crimson cousin the northern rata in the lower North Island, where pohutukawa is not naturally found.

Northern rata (*Metrosideros robusta*) was once widespread, but is now scarce over much of its former range and has completely disappeared from some areas. The main threat is from browsing by possums, but hybridisation with pohutukawa planted outside its natural range is also a problem.

Northern rata grows to more than 20 metres in height, and often begins life as an epiphyte, so its trunk is hollow, comprised of interlocking roots. It flowers profusely from November to January. Nectar-feeding native birds like tui and bellbird love it.

Ata Rangi's efforts in protecting northern rata and the environment were recognised as 2006 Supreme Award winner in the Wellington Balance Farm Environment Awards, and Forest & Bird's Wairarapa Branch also thanked Clive with a certificate of appreciation in September.

Story by Helen Bain