

Sydenham Edwards (1768 – 1819)

Sydenham Edwards was born in Brynbuga (Usk), Wales, the son of Lloyd Pittell Edwards, "a gentleman," and his wife Mary Reece. He was baptised at Llantilio Crossenny Church by his uncle, the Reverend William Reece, on 5 August 1768, and it seems that Teak, Teast or Teaste as a second name was acquired later. Claims that his father became a schoolteacher and church organist at Abergavenny have not been verified, but almost certainly the family was living in or near the town when a Mr Denman visited in 1779. He was so impressed with 11-year-old Sydenham Edwards' copies of plates from *Flora Londinensis*, a publi-



Sophora tetraptera

For many years the kōwhai genus *Sophora* was called *Edwardsia*, and the large-leaved species was known as *Edwardsia grandiflora* or *Sophora tetraptera*. *Sophora* comes from an old Arabic name for a tree with pea-like flowers. About 50 species are scattered worldwide, with eight of them (kōwhai) recognised in New Zealand. Phillip Miller, director of the Chelsea Physic Garden, used the names provided by Solander for his 1780 description of *Sophora tetraptera* (Greek *tetra* 'four', *pteron* 'wing', referring to the wings along the seedpod). Naturally occurring in the eastern North Island, Taupo and Waikato River areas, *Sophora tetraptera* is a tree up to 15 metres tall, sometimes semi-deciduous, with a short trunk. Leaves have up to 11 pairs of widely spaced, long and narrow greyish-green leaflets 14–40 mm long, giving rise to the common name "large-leaved kōwhai". Bunches of drooping yellow flowers are followed by dry ridged and knobbly seedpods containing hard yellow seeds.

cation on the wild plants of London, he showed them to the author, William Curtis, who promptly arranged botany and drawing instruction in London for the boy, took him on field trips and set him to work on further issues of the *Flora*.

In February 1787 Edwards made his first illustration for *The Botanical Magazine*, founded by Curtis to provide botanical and horticultural information on the flood of new exotic garden plants becoming available in Britain. His 1791 watercolour of kōwhai (*Sophora tetraptera*) was the first published hand-coloured engraving of a New Zealand plant. It was drawn from a specimen raised from seed collected at Poverty Bay by Banks and Solander on Cook's first voyage in 1769 and planted in the Apothecaries' Garden, Chelsea, around 1774. His patron died in 1799, but Edwards continued to work at a prodigious rate and by 1815 had made most of the 1721 watercolour drawings for *The Botanical Magazine*. He also illustrated a range of natural history subjects for other publications, and exhibited twelve works in the prestigious Royal Academy of Arts. After disagreement with the new editor of *The Botanical Magazine*, he left in 1815 to establish the rival *Botanical Register*.

In London, Sydenham Edwards lived at several addresses in the vicinity of Chelsea. He died at 5 Barrossa Place, Queen's Elm, on 8 February 1819, in his 51st year, and was buried at Chelsea Old Church. Many examples of his original work can be seen at various London museums (including that of the Linnean Society, of which he was a fellow since 1804), others are in private collections worldwide, but only one original work is known to exist in his birthplace, Wales.

In 1808 the controversial British botanist Richard Anthony Salisbury erected a new genus, *Edwardsia*, for three *Sophora* species with distinguishing features he believed had not been observed before. At the end of the Latin diagnosis he wrote, "*Nomen dedi in honorem Sydenhami Edwards, egregii Botanici Pictoris.*" Two of Salisbury's species were kōwhai from New Zealand. However, "there was a tacit understanding on the part of the botanical leaders of the period, including Brown, Banks and Smith, that Salisbury's botanical work and names should, as far as possible, be ignored". (*Journal of Botany*, 1886:297). Although not widely accepted as a separate genus, *Edwardsia* is generally regarded as a distinct group, and is treated as *Sophora* section *Edwardsia*. All New Zealand species of kōwhai belong to this subdivision.