

Tussock



Linnaeus says...

Some of the most common tussock grasses in Otago include the Copper tussock – *Chionochloa rubra* subspecies *cuprea*, Fescue tussock – *Festuca novae-zelandiae* and Silver tussock – *Poa cita*. All tussocks belong to the plant family consisting of grasses (Poaceae).



Hey guess what?

Tussock grasses also make very attractive garden plants. They can grow under a surprisingly wide range of temperatures and water levels and can often be used to add some life to parts of the garden where other plants struggle.

The rocky back country Otago landscape is not the easiest place to make a living. It is exposed to the wind, only receives small amounts of rain and gets bitterly cold in winter. Too extreme for woody plants, this territory is where the tussock grasses thrive, giving the land its characteristic golden hue.

The leaves of tussock grasses have a gutter-like shape to catch and funnel water down to the root system. They are even capable of doing this from the tiny water droplets that make up fog. Despite catching so much water, the tussock grasses only use very little. The ground in tussocky areas is often surprisingly wet, even when ground conditions elsewhere are dry. The water-harvesting ability of tussocks plays an important role in feeding the catchments that supply our hydroelectric power schemes.

In a number of ways our tussock grasslands are a lot like our forests. They are old, established ecosystems that support an abundance of animal life, including many insects, spiders and birds. You might be surprised to know that our tussock grasses can live for hundreds of years, as long as many of our large native trees.

The biggest threat to our native tussock is introduced grazing stock. Our tussocks did not evolve with sheep, cows or deer. Red deer in particular devastate alpine tussock and forestlands but control, through hunting and capturing for deer farming since the 1970s, has largely brought this under control.



Tussocks thrive in conditions too extreme for many plants



Aerial view of tussock covered Central Otago hills

