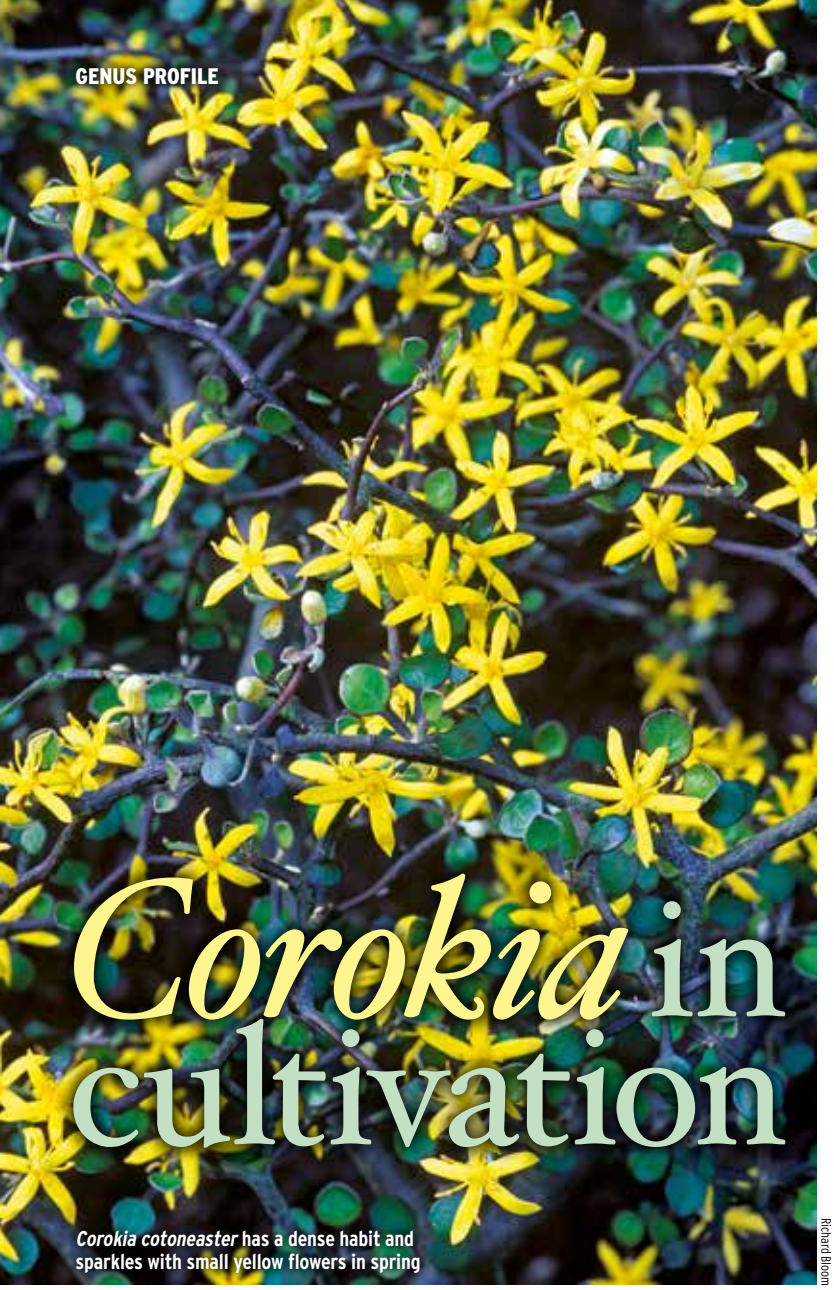
Corokia in cultivation



Corokia cotoneaster has a dense habit and sparkles with small yellow flowers in spring

Richard Bloom

Although uncommon in the UK, *Corokia* have many positive attributes. MONA ABBOUD, who owns a National Plant Collection, aims to raise their profile.

VISITORS TO RHS Garden Hyde Hall at any time of year will admire the many drifts of *Corokia* in the Australia and New Zealand section of the garden. In contrast, RHS Garden Wisley features a great range of *Corokia* grown as specimen plants. Despite the efforts of the RHS, however, this attractive evergreen genus of shrubs, native to New Zealand, is largely unknown and undervalued in the UK.



The divaricating branches of *Corokia cotoneaster*

Jonathan Buckley / GAP Photos

Corokia advocates, however, value the versatility of the genus, as well as the range of leaf shapes and colours, which ranges from subtle shades of green through to bronze, yellow, silver and even variegated. Plants typically range in height from 60cm to 3m and are easy to cultivate.

Background to the genus

Corokia takes its generic name from its Maori name, ***korokio***. It belongs to the *Argophyllaceae* family, although it was previously included in the *Cornaceae*. The genus comprises 10 species, nine of which are native to New Zealand and one to Australia. Only three species are readily available in horticulture, and these are the ones, along with their hybrids and cultivars, covered in this article.

All species are evergreen shrubs or small trees and are usually found in mountain or forest habitats. They have divaricating (zig-zag) branches that sometimes give the plants a tangled appearance. This branch structure, along with the typically small leaves, is thought to be a defence against strong winds and grazing animals. The leaves are alternate and obovate, oblanceolate or spathulate in shape, and silvery

white underneath. In late spring, small, five-petalled, star-shaped, yellow flowers are produced from the leaf axils or in short clusters. These are followed by colourful, usually pea-sized, fruit in autumn, which are yellow, orange or red.

The cultivated species

Corokia buddlejoides, the most tender species, is restricted to the warmest parts of North Island. Forming a slender, upright shrub, it has linear to lance-shaped, olive-green leaves with paler undersides. Its small, yellow flowers in late spring are followed by spherical, dark red fruits.

Corokia cotoneaster, the hardiest species, is found throughout New Zealand in dry, stony terrain. Commonly known as wire-netting bush because of its tangled branches and interlacing shoots, it has ovate to obovate, greyish green leaves. The yellow flowers in late spring are followed by red or yellow fruit. Its specific name derives from its resemblance to the European genus *Cotoneaster*, particularly when in fruit.

Corokia macrocarpa, intermediate in hardiness between the other two, is native to the Chatham Islands, off the east coast of New Zealand's South Island. A tall shrub or small tree, it has lanceolate greyish green leaves with silvery undersides. Its yellow flowers in late spring are followed by ovoid, red fruits.



Carole Drake / GAP Photos

Corokia macrocarpa **is the least frequent of the three cultivated species**

Cultivars

Corokia buddlejoides and *C. cotoneaster* have been crossed to produce *C.* × *virgata*. This typically forms a well-branched, upright shrub, although not as dense in habit as *C. cotoneaster*. The spoon-shaped leaves are greyish green and the yellow flowers are followed by red or yellow fruits in autumn.

Because this hybrid combines the best features of both species, quite a few cultivars have been selected from it. Cultivars of *C.* × *virgata* can be loosely divided into two categories; those with leaves that turn a beautiful deep bronze colour in winter, and those that remain green.

Those that go bronze in winter include 'Bronze King', 'Bronze Lady', 'Coppershine' and 'Frosted Chocolate'. These four are all similar in terms of garden performance. The most distinctive is 'Frosted Chocolate', which has the largest leaves, reaching 4cm in length while the others have leaves of around 2cm long. 'Coppershine' is the least dense and divaricating, and more upright than the other three cultivars.

Cultivars of *C.* × *virgata* that remain green in winter are more distinctive. 'Red Wonder' is a tall shrub with leathery green leaves producing red fruits. 'Sunsplash' is a striking, low-growing shrub with ➤

spoon-shaped to lance-shaped leaves that are variegated with an irregular yellow margin. 'Yellow Wonder' makes an elegant, tall shrub with leathery, olive-green leaves, taking its name from its yellow fruits.

Many cultivars of *C.* × *virgata* were raised by the late Graham Hutchins of County Park Nursery, Essex. These include 'County Park Lemon', 'County Park Orange', 'County Park Purple', 'Griff's Green' and 'Havering'. He was a pioneer of *Corokia* growing in the UK who collected material on four expeditions to New Zealand between 1977 and 1990. One of the last cultivars he raised before he died in 2012 is the beautiful *C. buddlejoides* 'Coco', a compact and rounded shrub ,with bronze-green leaves which also turn a deep bronze-red colour in the winter. It makes a good alternative to *Buxus*, or even *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Tom Thumb'. Unfortunately, it is not yet available to the public. However, Paul Boosey is carrying on with his grandfather's work and currently relocating County Park Nursery to Hampshire. Another nursery with a good selection of *Corokia* is Trevena Cross Nurseries in Cornwall.



Corokia buddlejoides has the largest leaves of the cultivated species

Mona Abboud



Corokia buddlejoides 'Coco'

Mona Abboud

Cultivation

Corokia generally thrive in the UK, perhaps because New Zealand shares some of our climatic and island conditions. For example, they cope well with challenging seaside conditions, being wind- and salt-tolerant, and are drought-tolerant. The main limit is hardiness, with *C. cotoneaster*, *C. macrocarpa* and *C.* × *virgata* and its cultivars hardy down to -8°C. However, a few of its cultivars, such as 'Banana Royal', 'Sunsprite' and 'Welsh Whisky', are less hardy. The least hardy of the cultivated ones is *C. buddlejoides*, which generally survives to -5°C.

The most important requirement



Corokia × *virgata* 'Frosted Chocolate'

Geoff Kidd / GAP Photos



Corokia × *virgata* 'Bronze King'

Mona Abboud

for these shrubs is excellent drainage – given that, they will grow in any light and moderately fertile soil, in sun or partial shade.

One attribute which should increase their popularity is the fact that they are virtually disease-free, making them a perfect alternative to *Buxus* (box) for hedging and topiary. *Buxus* is currently being decimated by box blight, volutella blight and box tree caterpillar.

All the species and most cultivars are vigorous and fast-growing, reaching 2–3m in height. Some, such as *C.* × *virgata* 'Sunsplash', remain smaller, to a maximum of 1.5m. All can be clipped to the desired shape and height.

Corokia make good specimen plants, those with coloured foliage can be integrated into mixed plantings, and all make excellent hedging plants. Hedges can be of a single cultivar, or mixed to create a patchwork of colour.

To get an idea of how *Corokia* are being used at two large gardens I spoke to Andrew Hellman, Garden Manager at RHS Garden Hyde Hall, and Matthew Pottage, Curator at RHS Garden Wisley.

At RHS Hyde Hall many single cultivars are grown. Andrew said:

'At Hyde Hall we began to restyle the Australian and New Zealand section in 2012, following recent winter plant losses. We embarked on a program of improving drainage in that part of the garden, within a new design inspired by the Olympic Park. The plan was devised by the horticulturists of Hyde Hall and resulted in the planting we see today in that section, which is intended to complement the Dry Garden.

'*Corokia* cultivars, including 'Yellow Wonder', 'Red Wonder' and 'Frosted Chocolate' were planted *en masse* in "bands" and are allowed to grow freely, except for light ➤

pruning to keep them in shape.'

At RHS Garden Wisley, Corokia are used predominantly as specimen plants. Matthew said:

'The *Corokia* adventure at Wisley started after the demise of a very rare and venerable 15-year-old *Corokia cotoneaster* 'Little Prince'. It was growing below an overhanging eucalyptus which blew down on top of it. Despite efforts to move it, the *Corokia* did not survive, but thankfully a new plant has been propagated from the parent shrub.

'It was apparent therefore that *Corokia* would do well on this site, thanks to its south-facing aspect and good drainage which compensate for the fact that temperatures have dropped to -10°C in recent winters.

'The area now known as the Mediterranean Garden was revamped in recent years and many different *Corokia* have been planted. Some have also been dotted around other parts of the garden, bringing the total at Wisley to 15. Highlights include a very old *C.* × *virgata* 'Red Wonder' which borders the Winter Walk and a beautiful *C.* × *virgata* 'Silver Ghost' which sits beside The Lake.

'Cultivars of *Corokia* are also being trialled at Wisley as part of our "alternatives to box" experiment. All are cultivars of *C.* × *virgata* and include 'Frosted Chocolate', 'Red Wonder' and 'Yellow Wonder'. We will also add 'Silver Ghost ' to this trial.'

Propagation

Corokia are difficult to propagate from seed. For best results, propagate by semi-ripe cuttings, taken from the end of summer to early October, in a potting medium composed of one third propagating bark (that sold by Melcourt is best), one third sand and grit, and one third rooting compost.



***Corokia* × *virgata* 'Yellow Wonder' grown as topiary**

Mona Abboud



***Corokia* × *virgata* 'Sunsplash'**

Mona Abboud



Corokia × *virgata* 'Silver Ghost' by Seven Acres Lake at RHS Garden Wisley

Joanna Kossak/RHS



Corokia × *virgata* 'Pink Delight'

Peter Chatterton



Corokia × *virgata* 'Coppershine'

Mona Abboud



A massed planting of *Corokia* × *virgata* 'Frosted Chocolate' at RHS Garden Hyde Hall

Mona Abboud

Conclusion

This attractive and versatile genus provides structure and all-year interest. The varied shape and foliage colours bring an interesting dimension to any style and size of garden. *Corokia* certainly deserves better recognition and promotion by garden centres, not just by a few specialised nurseries. They are truly a plant for all seasons.

Mona Abboud holds a National Plant Collection of *Corokia* in London. http://monasgarden.co.uk