

Native Plants for Lizard Enclosures

By Jo Bonner

General tips:

Plants like the same amount of light as lizards do so if your plants are dying the conditions aren't great for your lizards either!!

Put a tray under plants for the water to catch in during summer to help with soil water retention

Make sure to empty the trays of water within 2 days after heavy rain as plants don't like to sit in water for long periods of time

In summer water twice a week, in winter water only if dry- generally check once a week

You should expect to change your plants for fresh ones in enclosures every 8-12 months, this allows you time to trim to keep growth fresh, check for pests, pot on or fertilise, and provide new interest for your lizards.

Generally, you need to repot your plants once a year, so its good to have a rotation of suitable plants to change into an enclosure, its common practice to clean your enclosure at least twice a year so this is a good time to clean everything including the plants. Potting is best done in autumn or spring.

When potting a general all-purpose potting medium is fine from garden centre, finer mixes will keep plants wetter, more open mixes for plants that like to be drier. Its good to add a mulch on top of soil to prevent drying out in summer- like bark or stones. Make sure you don't fill the potting mix to the top of the pot as this makes it harder to water them without the water flowing off the pot.

If applying top-dress fertiliser to plants, make sure to water in well to prevent Lizards from being burnt from the excess on the top of the pots.

When changing out plants make sure to carefully de-pot them to check for ant's nests or other unwanted pests or insects living in the bottom of the pot, that you may inadvertently put into the cage.

Make sure the plants you are using are not poisonous to animals, or cause rashes or swelling.



Coprosma mangatangi

Stays as a tight mound, great for the south side of cages as prefers moist conditions. Grows branches horizontally which are great for smaller cages and for juveniles to sit on and hide in. Very slow growing shrub so doesn't require much trimming or shaping. It is frost tender. Doesn't like to dry out so make sure you use a tray for under the plant to help hold water when watering.

Coprosma middlemore

Stays as a tight shrub, trim to prevent them getting leggy. Bright green leaves, good cover for *N.elegans* and *N.greyii* as they are camouflaged. Plants grow quickly so good for providing cover during the summer heat. Prefers the lighter part of cages and needs a deep tray as dry out easily.



Coprosma rhamnoides

A divaricating shrub which prefers dry shaded conditions, great for cages as it likes dry shade, good hiding places for juveniles. Tiny orange, red and black berries in summer are good food source. Slow growing so can remain in cages for years.



Coprosma virescens

A divaricating shrub with golden browns stems and small leaves. Great branching shrub which tolerates wet and dry conditions, prefers the north side for the cage, as prefers sun. Can live in the cages for some years without attention, 2 years before it requires repotting.

Kunzea species

Kanuka performs well in cages with these precautions:

Pick plants that are divaricating or prostrate by nature, there are several species that grow in volcanic regions which is very good.

Or look for plants at your garden centre with deformed small leaves as these make the best cage plants, as their growth habits are slower and contorted branches make great sun-bathing perches.

Kanuka like dryer conditions than their cousin Manuka with it not long lived in cages as it needs more watering and fertiliser to stay at its best.

Kanuka also need full sun, so only have them placed on the sunny north facing area of the enclosure.



Sophora prostrata Dwarf Kowhai

A busy shrub which is used for topiary and bonsai as they are easily manipulated when growing. These kowhais make great cage plants because they are tough and cold hardy, bear small orange flowers in spring for interest and tolerate dry part shade conditions. They also can be easily clipped and produce tangled branches which are great for sitting on.

Metrosideros excelsa Pohutukawa

A great cage plant as they are drought tolerant and don't require fertiliser and constant potting. Also, once they get older they flower in the cages providing nectar to the lizards for an extra food interest. Some Pohutukawa species flower a lot earlier and a good performer is *M. vibrance* which is small in habit also. These trees make great shrubs if trimmed to keep shape and because they are multi branching they are good for climbing. Tough and hardy you would be unlucky to have one of these not do well in your cage!



Metrosideros carminea and ***M. perforata*** Climbing Rata



Small rounded leaves, and dense foliage provide good cover for lizards. Both Rata species like part shade and tolerate dry conditions, perfect for cages. They often are multi branching from the centre of the pot giving a nice dark environment, providing good cover for juveniles. They also will climb the walls and netting in cages so careful that they don't take over preventing the cage from being cleaned out properly.

Myrsine aquilonia Poor knights Matipo



The perfect cage plant, this shrub is naturally found in coastal areas in Northland and on the Poor Knight islands. It prefers dry conditions, can grow in sun or shade, not easy to kill!

Small heart-shaped leaves on robust branches makes it ideal for lizards to climb on. Black edible berries in summer on the female shrubs.

In the wild its conservation status is listed as “at risk” so sometimes hard to find in garden centres, but specialised native nurseries will grow it.