Identities - Allan Corry

Recently, Colin Ryder interviewed Allan Corry. Allan is one of those people who are the backbone of any voluntary organisation. Never likely to get a Conservation Award, never likely to be on a Committee but always there on the ground, where it really counts. Allan is Mana Island's seed collector par excellence. This is Allan's story.

"I am part of a volunteer group of helpers who collect seed for regeneration of Mana Island's bush lands and forest. How did it all start?

On a visit to Kapiti Island the ranger, Peter Daniels, sat us all down for a talk. The first question he asked was "How many of you are home-grown Kiwis?" Half the group proudly put up their hands.

He then asked us to identify the native trees around us.

The answers were revealing.

It was a shock. We couldn't identify our own New Zealand trees.

So I set about trying to learn the trees while tramping in the bush and mountains. After months of observing trees, leaves, bark, flowers, fruits and nuts, it was time to assist Mana's seed collection programme. Jason Christensen (DoC) provided a seasonal calendar of approximate seeding times, a list of seeds required for the island and a tree identification book for reference. I was given maps of local areas to collect from, so as to maintain similar genetic stock to that on the island.

I spent a lot of time the first year exploring the Porirua and Karehana Bay scenic reserves, attempting to find likely seed trees of different species. Every so often I would fluke the right tree at the right time and collect some seeds. I soon learnt the hard way that this was a hit and miss method. Observing flowering onwards to maturing seeds, so as to learn the seeding cycles of each species of tree, was a better way to get results.

The seeds of the high canopy of the forest eluded all my efforts, until a big storm bought down immature flowers, seeds and berries. These proved to be indicators of where and when seeds could be found at a later date.

A seed collecting year starts in late spring with the flowering and seeding of rangiora. The slowly maturing seeds of the red matipo might also be ready. It is essential to record ripe seeding periods in your calendar throughout the seasons for future reference.

The easy seeds to collect are those with hard shells – miro, matai, pigeonwood, hinau etc. They are very colourful when ripe, easily seen by both birds and collectors.

The hardest seeds to collect are those that remain green throughout their maturing with few clues to indicate ripeness. Henge hange and lancewoods change slightly with a touch of purple just before they fall to the ground and disappear into the leaf mulch. Giant kahikatea grow a small pink fruit attached to the seed before falling.

Each tree has its own way of dispersing its seed, or protecting seeds from browsers. Divaricating shrubs have densely interlaced twigs with small leaves; the seeds deep inside the bush are like miniature pearls.

Seeds dispersed by wind from high in the canopy are the most difficult to collect.
For example, half a dozen parachutes, shaped like little feather dusters, are released for wind dispersal from each of the seed capsules of the puketea. Rewarewa has to be watched closely to observe the first of the seed capsules splitting. Too soon and the seeds are not viable; too late, and the seeds have flown with the aid of a tiny wing. Then you must wait for another flowering year and six more months for the seed to develop.

Kohekohe trees seed every two years when they produce a bumper crop. Bucketfuls are collected to broadcast at random under the established tree canopies on Mana Island. Other seeds are being trialled to see if this method might work for them as well.

It cannot be assumed that all seeds will grow without further assistance. For example a miro seed may lie in the soil for years until there is a wet enough season to enable it to germinate. It then requires many wet seasons for its slow growth. The island's nursery, with its regular supply of water, speeds up the growth of many young trees. It is there that you can see the results of your collecting labours.

It's all the little discoveries to be made along the way, learning the many facets of forest ecology as you explore, that makes collecting interesting. Each collecting expedition reveals wonderful diversity of life forms. It's good to get to know a forest in all its seasons and to know that Mana Island will one day be the same."