



Restore Native

Trees for the land, birds and the people

A Practical Guide to Waterway Planting

Practical, farmer-friendly guidance for fencing,
planting and maintaining your waterway margins

E-BOOK





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Introduction

If you've got a stream, drain or wet gully running through your farm, you've probably already asked some version of these questions: where do I start, what should I actually plant, and how do I stop it dying in the first summer?

This guide answers those questions the way we'd talk you through them on-farm - practically, without the jargon, and with an eye on what will actually survive and do its job long-term.

Waterway planting isn't just a compliance box to tick. Done well, it protects your water, stabilises your banks, and brings the birdlife back - while staying out of the way of your farming operation.

This guide covers fencing and access, setting your buffer width, choosing the right plants for each zone, and the weed control, planting technique and timing that keep it alive.





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Protects the whole farm system

Waterway planting protects more than the stream itself - done well, it protects the whole farm system. Planted margins slow runoff before it reaches streams and drains, while dense roots and ground-cover trap sediment before it ever gets that far.

Wetland and riparian species help filter nutrients out of the water, and root systems hold the banks together and reduce erosion over time. None of this replaces fencing - stock exclusion still has to come first - but planting and fencing work together as one system.

A planted margin is best thought of as working infrastructure, not spare land. The wider and denser it is, the more work it can do.

Shade, habitat and the long-term win

Once a margin has enough canopy, it starts cooling smaller streams and drains - and cooler water supports aquatic life far better than water sitting exposed in full sun.

At the same time, the planting itself becomes habitat: for insects, for birds, and eventually for native wildlife more broadly. Connect enough of these margins together across a catchment and you start building genuine biodiversity corridors.

The goal: slow the flow, hold the soil, protect the water.



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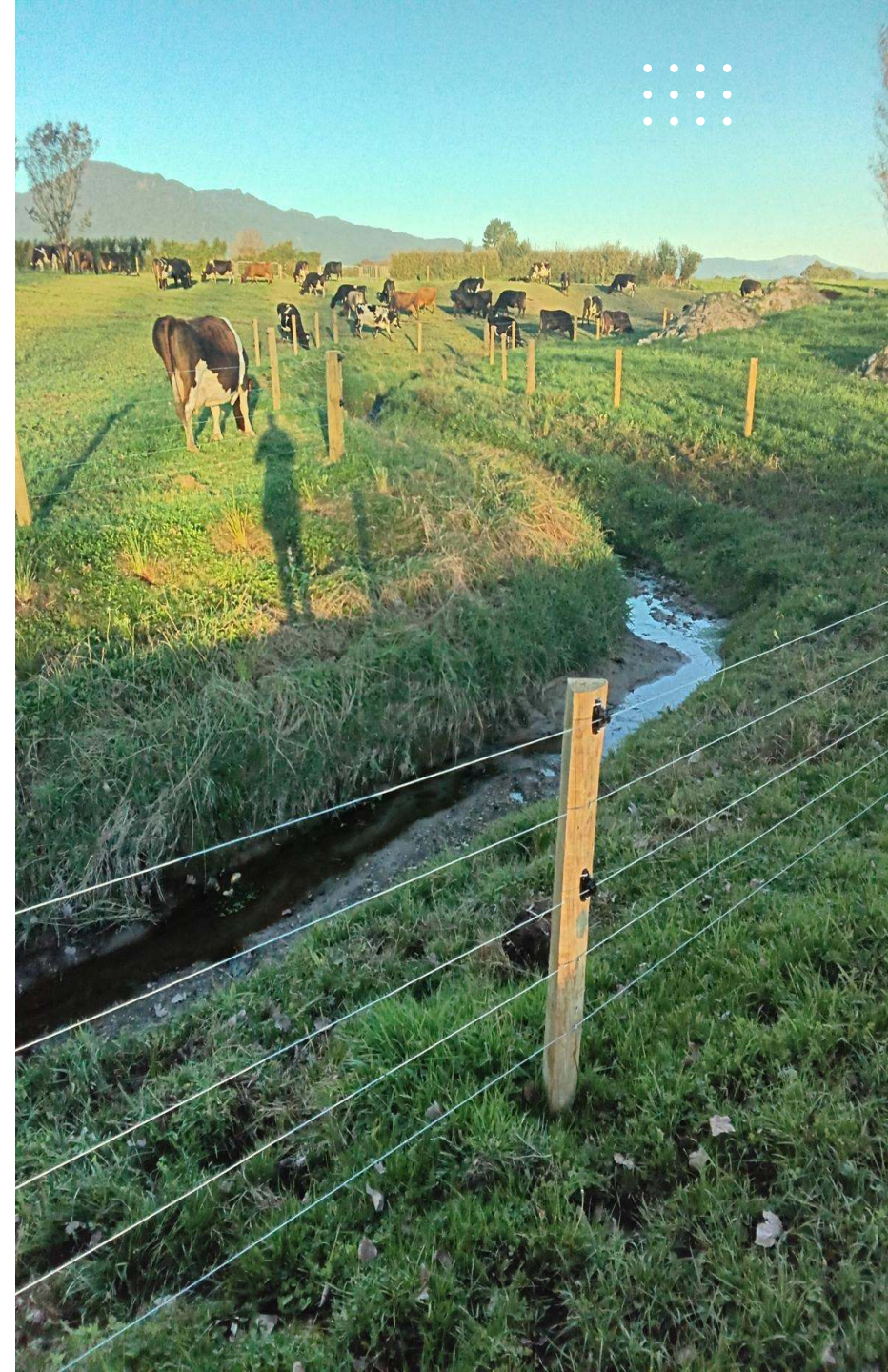
Fencing and access come first

Good waterway planting starts before a single plant goes in the ground. Fencing keeps stock out and gives new plants a real chance to establish - without it, nothing else in this guide matters much.

But fencing is also your one chance to get access right, so think beyond the fence line itself. Plan access for future maintenance before plants go in, because once the margin fills in, retrofitting access is much harder.

Think about gates, machinery access, and where spraying or releasing will actually happen - and make sure whoever's planting has the correct plan and understands the species layout.

If the site can't be maintained, the planting will struggle.
That's the single biggest reason waterway plantings fail.



How wide should you go?

The buffer is the working strip between the waterway and the fence - and how wide you make it changes what you can realistically achieve.

Wider margins do more work: more room for filtering, better bank stability, and more biodiversity value. Narrow margins can still work, but plant choice and ongoing maintenance matter a lot more when there's less room for error.

Keep tall, broad plants away from fence wires, where they'll eventually create problems, and use lower-growing wetland species closest to the water where appropriate. Narrow doesn't mean pointless – it just means being more deliberate about which species you choose.



A quick reference

1-2 m

A narrow planting option for suitable drains and tight margins, using Carex for bank stabilisation. Check the stock exclusion setback that applies to your waterway before deciding where to fence.

4-5 m

Room for around three rows of planting and noticeably more biodiversity value.

5-7 m or more

Full species zonation, from wet-edge sedges through to canopy trees.



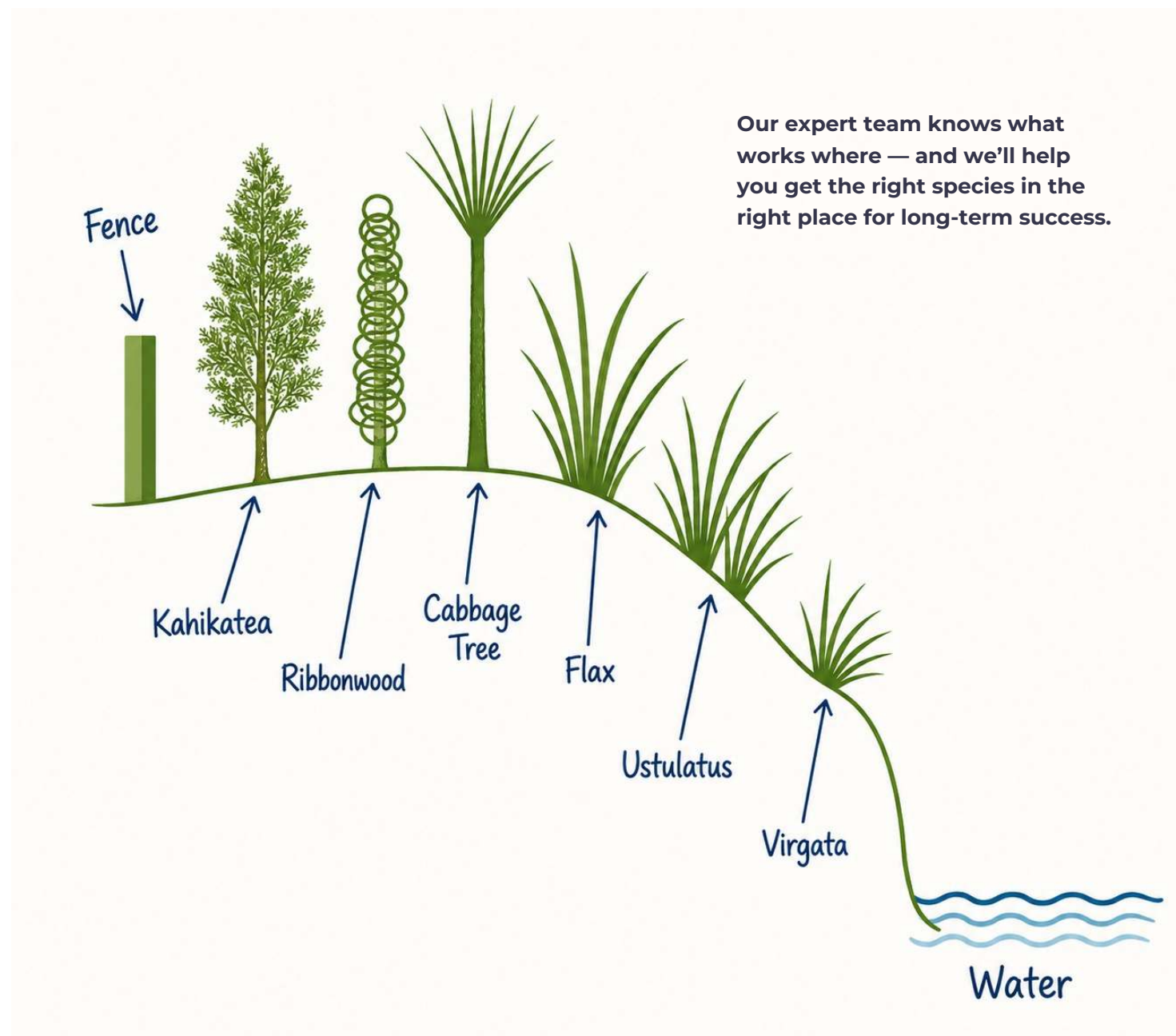
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Matching species to the site

A good plan matches species to the actual conditions on your site, not to a generic list. Right tree, right place matters everywhere, but it matters even more beside water.

Before finalising a plant list, walk the site and map the wet areas, dry edges, steep banks, shade and frost pockets.

Group wetland species through the wetter centre and lower bank, use hardy colonisers and shrubs to protect exposed edges, and allow for spacing, access and future maintenance once the canopy fills in.

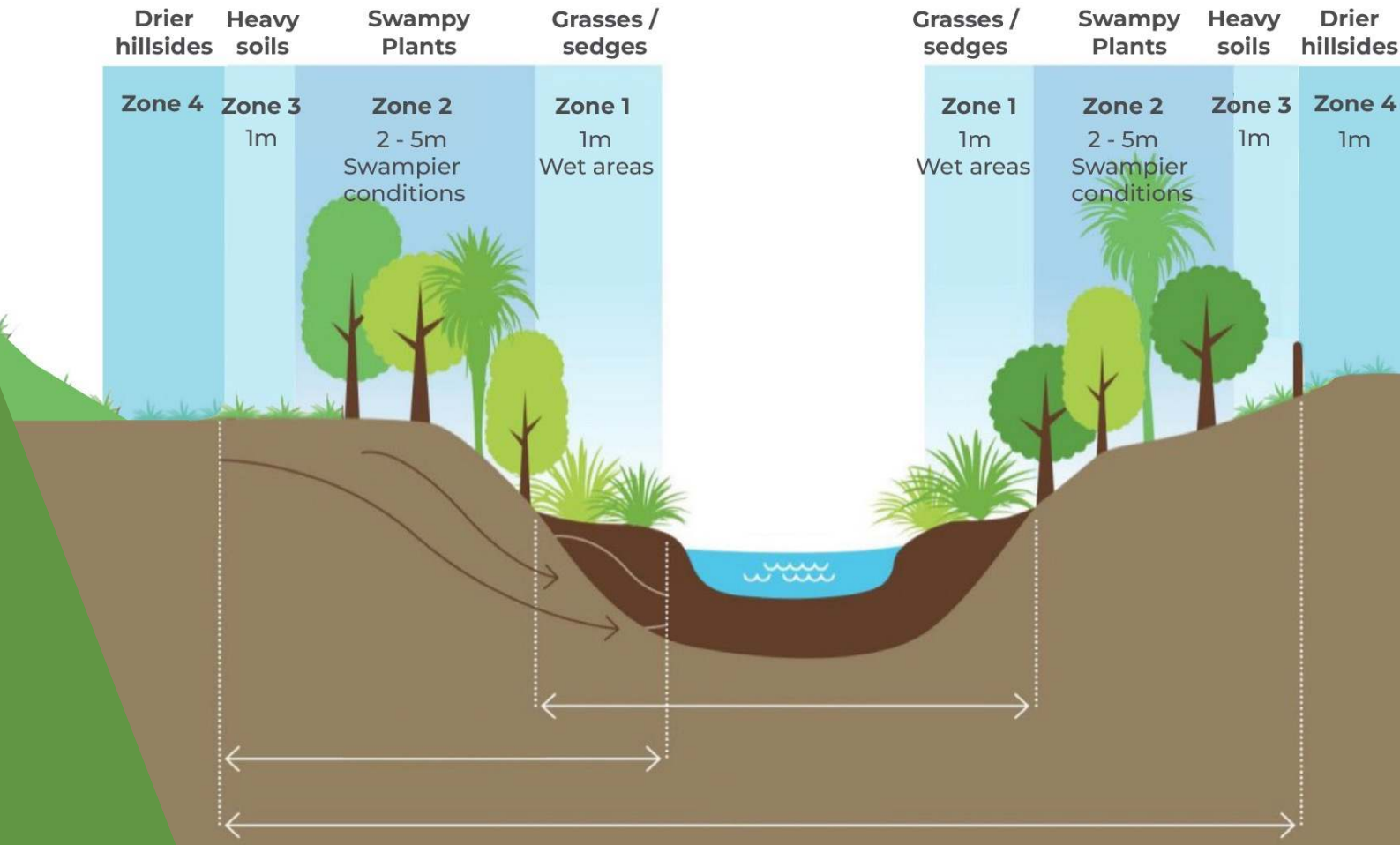


What to plant where

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Common waterway species

Waterway margins naturally sort into zones moving out from the water. Closest to the wet edge, *Carex geminata*, *Carex secta*, *Carex virgata*, *Cyperus ustulatus* and *Oioi* do the heavy lifting.

Through the swampier, wet-to-damp conditions further back, cabbage tree, kahikatea, ribbonwood, karamū and toetoe take over. On the damp-to-dry outer edge, mānuka, kānuka, kōhūhū, lemonwood and akeake round things out.

Use a mix across these zones, not a single-species strip - tailored to your waterway's soil moisture, exposure and how easily you can get in to maintain it.



Carex, not flax

Flax has its place, but it isn't always the right default for drains and tight waterways. *Carex* species are generally lower-growing and easier to manage near fences, and a dense *Carex* strip does real work - slowing flow, trapping sediment, soaking up nutrients.

Flax, by contrast, can get large and unruly in a skinny margin, and mature clumps can eventually split and collapse into the stream, which can cause real problems around culverts.



The practical rule: keep flax back around two metres from the water's edge, and use *Carex* at the immediate edge instead.



Weed control and site prep

Good waterway planting starts before planting day - and this is the step that's easiest to skip and most costly to skip. Target aggressive weeds like blackberry, convulvulus, gorse and honeysuckle early, because once your natives are in the ground, herbicide options become far more limited. **Preparation is cheaper than rescue work.**

If you've got a serious infestation, don't rush the planting. With bad blackberry or convulvulus problems in particular, delaying planting by a year can be the smarter call - get the site properly prepared first, rather than fighting the weeds and the plants at the same time.

Match your spraying method to the site too: spot spray where you want clear planting zones and less disturbance, and use wider preparation where the site is heavily grassed or weed pressure is high.

Before spraying near a waterway, check the product label and applicable local rules, and prevent spray from entering the water.





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Choosing your planting window

Plant when soil moisture and access actually suit the job, not just because a date's circled on the calendar. Avoid high-flow and flood risk periods, and finish fencing and weed preparation first.

Schedule your first maintenance visit before you plant, not after - it's easy to forget once the plants are in the ground.



On planting day

Technique still matters, even on a planting that's meant to look natural beside the water. Plant at the right depth, with the root collar sitting at soil level, and firm the soil around the plant to remove air pockets.

Keep sedges and wetland plants grouped where they naturally belong, rather than scattered evenly - natural-looking planting still needs deliberate placement, it just shouldn't look deliberate once it's grown in.





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Maintenance and releasing

Getting plants in the ground is only the beginning. What happens over the following year decides whether they survive.

The right rule of thumb: release competing grass once it reaches roughly halfway up the native plant, not on a fixed date.

Turning up because a date's in the diary - rather than because the plant actually needs it - is one of the most common, and avoidable, mistakes in waterway planting.

Monitor spring regrowth before it overtakes young plants, and use manual clearing if grass or weeds have already overtopped them. Selective herbicides such as haloxyfop can be useful for grass control where appropriate, though waterway sites need extra care around spray drift, buffers and sensitive areas.





What success looks like

Success isn't "trees planted" - it's plants surviving, filling in, and starting to do their job.

It's a slow transformation: a freshly planted margin looks sparse and vulnerable for the first year or two before it fills out and starts doing the job you planted it for. That's normal - consistent releasing in year one is what gets you there.

- Plants visible and not being smothered by grass
- Banks stabilising and the margin filling in
- A genuine mix of sedges, shrubs and longer-term canopy species
- Planting that's still accessible enough to maintain
- Shade and habitat increasing over time



From planting...



...to establishment



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Funding support

Funding support starts with a project-ready plan - most funders want to see you've already thought through the site, the species, and the maintenance approach before they'll back it.

A few avenues worth checking, depending on your location:

- Regional council support, depending on your location and project fit
- Waikato River Authority, for eligible restoration projects in the Waikato catchment
- Regen Waikato (formerly WCEET), for eligible ecological enhancement projects within the Lake Taupō and Waikato River catchments
- Local catchment groups and other funders may also be relevant

**Our team can point you in the right direction
and get you funding quote ready**





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Five decisions that make the difference

Plan the planting and the maintenance together - one without the other rarely works.

01

Fence first

Protect the waterway and make future maintenance possible.

02

Plan the margin

Match species to wet, damp and drier zones.

03

Choose Carex intentionally

Lower-growing sedges are often better than default flax strips.

04

Prep before planting

Weed control is much easier before natives are in the ground.

05

Maintain early

Releasing and monitoring protect the investment.



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About us

At Restore Native, we make native planting simple, affordable, and effective.

Our Waikato nursery produces more than a million hardy natives each year, with species and sizes to suit every site and budget.

We supply and deliver plants across the North Island, and for Waikato and Bay of Plenty landowners we offer a complete restoration service — from on-site planning and drone mapping to spraying, plant supply, planting, maintenance, and releasing.

We can also help you navigate the best funding support available for your project.

Whether you're sourcing plants only or want full project delivery, we'll help you get the right tree in the right place.



Our Mission

We're on a mission to restore unproductive farmland into thriving, diverse native forests — bringing back biodiversity, birdsong, and long-term resilience.



WATCH: Our Mission





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Ready to plan your own project?

We can help with every stage — from plant supply-only within the North Island and complete restoration delivery across Waikato & Bay of Plenty.

Get in touch with Adam to talk through your project or book a no-obligation on-site consultation.



Adam is a passionate conservationist, farmer, and founder of Restore Native.

Through Restore Native, he's helped thousands of landowners turn unproductive land into thriving native forests. His approach is practical and grounded — blending deep local knowledge with a firm belief that productive farming and ecological restoration can work hand in hand.

In 2023, Adam received national recognition at the Primary Industries New Zealand Awards, winning the Kaitiakitanga / Guardianship & Conservation Award. He also founded the Te Miro Kiwi Project, a community-driven effort to return kiwi to the local bush.

Adam Thompson

P 021 724 181

E adam@restorenative.co.nz

restorenative.co.nz

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