

Releasing plants in Waikato restoration projects

In New Zealand restoration projects, manual releasing means removing competing vegetation around planted natives, so the desired plants get light, water, and nutrients. It is one of the most important maintenance tasks during the first 2 to 3 years after planting. The main release periods are typically:

- Spring: when grasses and weeds begin rapid growth.
- Autumn: to reduce competition over winter and into the next growing season.

It is recommended to check plantings at least twice yearly, with additional visits on highly fertile sites. Additional spraying may be required (pre/post Xmas) in prolific growth years.

1. Locate and assess each native plant

Check:

- Whether the plant is being shaded by grass or weeds.
- Whether climbing weeds are present.
- Whether the plant is vigorous enough to compete on its own.

Young plants below the height of surrounding vegetation usually need priority attention.

2. Clear a release circle Remove grass and weeds around the plant by:

- Hand-pulling.
- Grubbing with a planting spade, trowel, grubber, or hoe.
- Cutting vegetation at ground level where pulling could disturb roots.

A common field standard is to maintain a weed-free circle of roughly 0.5 to 1 metre diameter, adjusted for plant size and weed pressure.

3. Avoid damaging the native plant

Take care to:

- Leave the native's roots undisturbed.
- Avoid snapping stems or stripping bark.
- Watch for hidden seedlings nearby that you want to retain.

Restore Native specifically recommends carefully peeling away surrounding weeds while keeping the tree's root system undisturbed.

4. Deal with removed vegetation Options include:

- Leaving pulled weeds around the plant as mulch (if seed heads are absent).
- Laying vegetation flat away from the stem.
- Removing highly invasive weeds from the site.

Pulled weeds can help conserve moisture and suppress further weed growth as they decompose.

5. Apply mulch if available. Mulching significantly reduces future maintenance:

- Wood chips.
- Weed-free straw.
- Wool mulch mats.
- Coconut fibre mats.
- Cardboard covered with mulch.

Mulch should be kept a few centimetres away from the stem to prevent rot.

6. Special considerations in NZ restoration sites - pasture grasses and weeds such as:

- Ryegrass
- Cocksfoot
- Yorkshire fog
- Paspalum

are often the biggest threat during establishment because they rapidly outcompete young natives for moisture and light.

Climbing weeds: prioritise removal of:

- Blackberry
- Honeysuckle
- Bindweed / convolvulus
- ivy / Moth plant

These can smother plantings and often require repeated visits.

7. Wetland sites - take extra care around:

- Sedges
- Rushes
- Flax

as these may be desirable restoration species and can be mistaken for weeds.

8. Summary - best-practice tips

1. Start early before weeds completely overtop the plant.
2. Release after rain when soils are soft and weeds pull more easily.
3. Work systematically along planting lines.
4. Mark plants with stakes if visibility is poor.
5. Record survival and weed pressure during maintenance visits.

Indicators that releasing is working:

6. Native plants remain visible above surrounding vegetation.
7. Increased annual height growth.
8. Reduced mortality during dry summers.
9. Faster canopy closure, which eventually suppresses weeds naturally.

For Waikato restoration projects, grass competition is often the dominant issue in the first few years, so maintaining generous weed-free zones around each plant usually delivers the biggest improvement in survival and growth.