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**Growing native at home**

*By Jon Letman - Special to The Garden Island*

Posted: Sunday, Mar 12, 2006 - 07:17:53 pm HST

Folks on Kaua'i are blessed with some of the world's most unique plant life, and yet most people have very little contact with it in daily life.



Jon Letman / Special to The Garden Island

Hawai'i has one of the highest concentrations of endemic plants anywhere, with 90 percent of the approximately 1,200 native plants growing no place else on the planet. Despite this, many people spend their days surrounded by common, human-introduced plants which grow in abundance throughout the tropical world.

**Going native: Native Hawaiian plants like this hibiscus** are often drought-tolerant and well-adapted to a variety of Kaua'i conditions, while at the same time uniquely ornamental and in need of protection.

Evolving from less than 300 proto-species which arrived on these remote volcanic islands as seeds and spores, Hawai'i's native flora grew in isolation, with no predators, and so remained largely defenseless, assuming unique forms found only in Hawai'i. Since the first human contact around 400 A.D. and especially after Captain Cook's arrival, Hawai'i's native plants have been slashed, burned, eaten by grazing animals, sacrificed for the sake of development, and pushed towards the irreversible edge of extinction.



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On Kaua'i, fortunately, "conservation" is not simply a trendy word, but a real way of life for many. Members of organizations like the Kaua'i Native Plant Society, the Koke'e Resource Conservation Program, and the Kaua'i Invasive Species Committee actively protect native plants as they stave off attack by aggressive pests like shefflera, kahili ginger and banana poka.

The Kilauea Natural Wildlife Refuge has a modest collection of native plants including the curious leafy alula (*Brighamia insignis*), endemic to Kaua'i and Ni'ihau. The National Tropical Botanical Garden's Limahuli Garden in Ha'ena and the McBryde Garden in the Lawa'i Valley both have outstanding collections of native plants, many of which even life-long kama'aina may have never seen.

But what can the average Kauaian do to better understand, protect and enjoy native Hawaiian plants? Simple -- dedicate part of a home garden to native species suited to the environment. Experts suggest novice planters may achieve greater success starting with a smaller area, gradually introducing more Hawaiian plants until one day novices realize they're truly growing native.

For dry, coastal areas, common hearty natives like hala (*Pandanus tectorius*), naupaka (*Scaevola taccada*) and creeping 'ilima (*Sida fallax*) are salt-tolerant and drought-resistant. Similarly, the now rare ma'o or Hawaiian cotton (*Gossypium sandwicense*) is a native member of the malvaceae (hibiscus) family. Ma'o thrives in heat, and can stand rocky or clay soil, offering bright, cheery yellow blossoms most of the year.

One large shade tree that can handle arid coasts and is under-represented on Kaua'i is the kou (*Cordia subcordata*), which has a smooth, pleasant leaf, and gentle orange tubular flowers, perfect for stringing lei.

Residents of wetter parts of the island may be able to grow native tree ferns (*hapu'u*), and smaller ferns like *kupukupu*. Palm enthusiasts can choose from 23 species of *loulou* (*Pritchardia*), the only palm genus native to Hawai'i. These handsome fan palms usually prefer full sun and well-drained soil, and will thrive almost anywhere, some in areas receiving more than 200 inches of rain annually.

No matter what the Kaua'i location, planters should be able to grow native hibiscus such as the 'akiohala (*Hibiscus furcellatus*), which has lavender flowers and does well in both dry and wet conditions. *Koki'o ke'oke'o* (white Hibiscus waimeae) and the *koki'o 'ula* (red hibiscus) also make fine additions to any home.

Many native plants seen on trails and higher elevations such as *iliau*, *pukiawe* and *papala*, lend an air of mystery, evoking images of Hawai'i before human contact, yet can be difficult to grow in lower elevations. *Pukiawe*, an attractive shrub in the Australian heather family, is common along the trails of Waimea, yet it is nearly impossible to transplant.

Countless native grasses, ferns and shrubs can be enjoyed walking through the Alaka'i Swamp Trail and, while it may be as inviting to take a specimen home to grow, these plants survive best undisturbed in their natural environment.

Remember that when purchasing any of Hawai'i's endangered species, they must be tagged with labels which have an identifying serial number indicating an endangered status propagated from cultivated stock.

Such plants should not be grown outside the home garden.

To begin a search for native Hawaiian plants best suited for homes in particular areas of the island, try the following:

- **Kauai Nursery & Landscaping:** In Puhi on Kaunuaui'i Highway, Kaua'i's largest commercial nursery has more than 30 varieties of native plants in stock, and can grow specific items for landscape jobs as requested;
- **Home Depot:** The nursery department stocks natives including ferns like *kupukupu* and *palapalai* as well as the indigenous lily *ukiuki*, the silvery shrub *kulu'i*, and *ma'u 'aki'aki*, a hearty coastal grass. Others like 'ae'ae, *koai'a* and 'oha (*Delissea rhytidosperma*) with unusual green flowers and maroon fruit are beautiful and affordable;
- **Mike Demotta:** One of the founding members of the Kaua'i Native Plant Society, Demotta maintains a small private native nursery on the Westside, offering several dozen species including *pritchardia* palms, *alaha'e*, *maile*, *alula* and a coastal form of *akoko*, all of which can be seen by appointment (please call 651-3138).

He will be sharing a booth with the Koke'e Resource Conservation Program at the Kauai County Farm Bureau Fair beginning this Thursday, Aug. 26 on the

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grounds of Vidinha Stadium. A portion of the plant-sale profits will go to benefit the Kaua'i Native Plant Society.

For more information about native Hawaiian plants online, please visit: <http://www.botany.hawaii.edu/faculty/carr/natives.htm>.

*Jon Letman is a freelance writer who lives in Lihu'e.*

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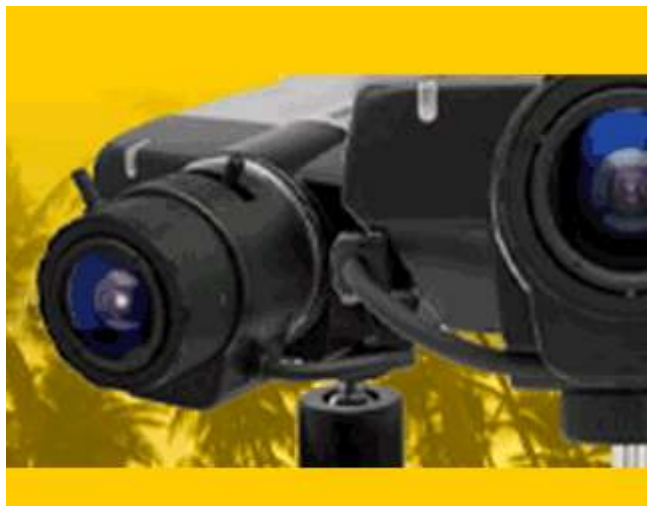
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