

`ōhi`a lehua (*Metrosideros polymorpha*)

MYRTACEAE, myrtle family



This species is endemic to Kaua`i, O`ahu, Moloka`i, Lāna`i, Maui, and Hawai`i island (Wagner et al. 1990).

Superficially similar *Metrosideros* species are known as *vuga* in Fiji, *rata* in New Zealand (Maori), and *puarata* in Tahiti (Hillebrand 1888; Chabout and Chabout undated).

Summary statement of uses: The hard, dark reddish wood of *`ōhi`a lehua* was used in house and canoe construction and in making images (*ki`i*), *poi* boards, weapons, tool handles, *kapa* beaters (especially the rounded *hohoa* beater), and as superior quality firewood. The foliage served religious purposes and young leaf buds were used medicinally. The flowers and leaf buds (*liko lehua*) were used in making *lei*.

Hillebrand (1888) states, "The wood is very hard, furnishes the best fuel, and is also used for building houses. Many of the old idols were made of it."

`Ōhi`a lehua had religious value to Hawaiians. Wood, branches, and leaves of *`ōhi`a lehua* were also used religiously in construction of certain parts of *heiau*, such as special houses and, in some cases, branches with leaves serving as a loose roof (Papa Ii 1959; Kamakau 1976:138; Dye 1991:34).

Regarding images (*ki'i*), Abbott (1992:114) stated, “Most of the large images were carved from wood of the ‘ōhi`a *lehua*, an endemic species whose usage in building construction has already been described. This tree was regarded as a *kinolau* of the gods Kāne and Kū, and the reddish color of the freshly cut wood may have been considered appropriate for figures associated with sacrifices. The wood tends to crack as it dries, and most of the surviving large images manifest such cracks. Exposure to rain and sunshine also has the effect of bleaching the wood, turning it gray, as may be seen occurring in the figures at Hale o Keawe, the *heiau* enclosure at Pu’uhonua o Honaunau in Kona. Most of the *akua kā'ai* were also made from ‘ōhi`a *lehua*, but several other woods were also used.”

Handy and Handy (1972:241) wrote, “The ‘ōhi`a *lehua* is a ‘body’ of Ku. Images of Ku-ka’ili-moku, the war god, were carved out of ‘ōhi`a logs in conventional form depicting ferocity.”

‘Ōhi`a *lehua* was one of the five primary plants represented at the hula altar (*halapepe*, ‘ie’ie, *maile*, ‘ōhi`a *lehua*, *palapalai*) (Emerson 1965). Abbott (1992:117) noted that the ‘ōhi`a *lehua* was used on the altar to represent the god Kūk`ōhi`a *Laka*, named for a famous ‘ōhi`a *lehua* tree that had a red flower on an eastern branch and a white one on a western branch.

Lennox (1967) wrote of this species, “Used for house timbers, *poi* boards, idols, *kapa* beaters.”

Regarding its use medicinally, Handy and Handy (1972) wrote, “The leaf buds (*liko*) were prescribed as a tonic to stimulate the appetite and digestion of a debilitated child.”

Status at Auwahi: ‘Ōhi`a *lehua* trees are relatively common at Auwahi growing scattered in small stands among other dryland forest trees, increasing in frequency with increasing elevation.