

Hala-lujah

A Humble Tree Worthy of Praise

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Photography by Rachel Olsson

With its free-form leaves and stout trunk with multi-fingered roots extending into the earth, the hala tree is easily distinguishable amidst Hawai'i's flourishing landscape.





Tiny thorns edge the hala's leaves (top left), making them difficult to work with; female hala bear tightly clustered fruit (bottom right), which can be found on all five sub-species.



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RE THOSE PINEAPPLE TREES?" the New York honeymooners ask. Having stopped off the zigzag road to Hāna, they search Kahanu Garden for the perfect Kodak moment. Bewildered by what appears to be a grove of pineapple trees, they seek my assurance it is indeed Hawai'i's most iconic fruit.

"Uh, no...those are *hala* trees," I say. "The fruit looks similar, but pineapple grows on the ground, not in trees." Visibly disappointed, they shrug and resume their search for a more memorable backdrop. Little do they know the indigenous hala plant preceded the alien pineapple's arrival to Hawai'i by millions of years.

A fossilized fruit discovered in a 500,000-year-old Kaua'i lava flow proves that hala is native to Hawai'i, yet migrating Polynesians so highly prized the tree they sailed with its seeds in their canoes. Found throughout Wailea Resort, hala is one of the most useful trees in Polynesia, second only to coconut palms. It provides material for shelter, containers, flooring, bedding, medicine, food, art supplies, and even perfume. And the hardy tree asks for very little in return; it grows quickly, is drought resistant, and can even drink brackish or salty water.

Its stout trunk is supported by a tangle of prop roots similar to mangrove trees. Along its branches, its elongated leaves spiral in a recurring corkscrew pattern, the inspiration for its English name, "screw pine."

Female hala bear tight clusters of keys, also called drupes or fruitlets, of various shapes and sizes resembling pineapple. Male hala flaunt prominent creamy white spikes called *hīnano* cloaked in aromatic straw-colored pollen.

Native Hawaiians identify five types of hala, distinguished by the fruit's color and size: *hala pia* with tiny cream-colored fruit; *hala melemele*, with small yellow fruit; *hala 'ikoi*, a two-toned lemon-colored fruit edged in bright orange; *hala libilibi 'ula*, a bright red fruit with a yellow midsection; and *hala 'ula*, with dazzling red-orange fruit. Though both fruit and flower are edible, in old Hawai'i hala was eaten only as a last recourse during times of famine.

The tree's most useful offering is its long, blade-like leaves called *lauhala*, an all-purpose material with more functions than duct tape. Prior to European contact, Hawaiians used lauhala for thatching or to weave durable ground mats, pillows, bedding, baskets, and canoe sails. After missionaries arrived, its use extended to fashion, as evidenced by the ornate woven fans, headbands, hats, bracelets, and hair adornments that debuted during the early 1800s.

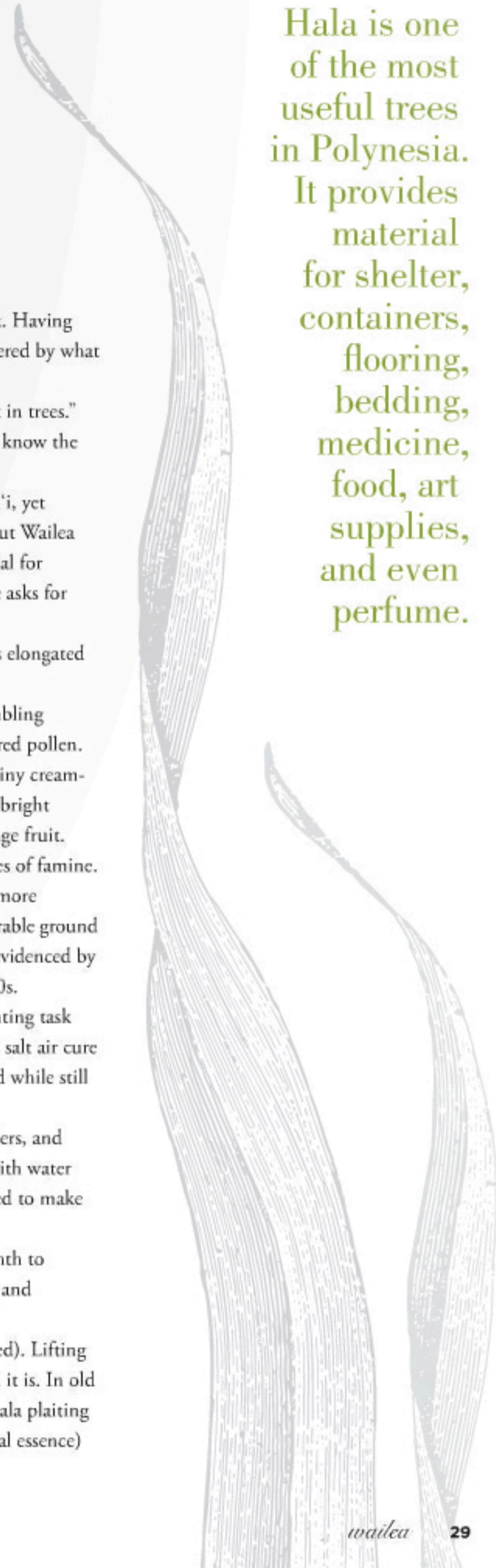
Making any lauhala creation is both tedious and labor intensive. Simply gathering the leaves is a daunting task because cruel, tiny thorns line each leaf edge. Prime hala grow in moist areas near the shore. The sun and salt air cure the leaves rendering them more durable and pliable. The choicest brown leaves are recently fallen or dried while still attached to the tree.

Cleaning lauhala is similarly laborious. Cloaked in red dirt and crawling with lizards, centipedes, spiders, and insects, each leaf must be rinsed, cut, and trimmed of its thorns. Next, the denuded leaves are softened with water and flattened by rolling them around one's hand in a process called *po'ala* (to coil). The coils are combined to make a fat circular roll called *kūka'a*, containing 50 to 100 connected leaves.

After resting for a month, the cured lauhala is cut into small strips called *koana* ranging from one-eighth to three-quarters of an inch depending upon delicacy of weave. Because the leaves' texture, thickness, color, and pliability differ, koana are sorted and bundled together by similarity.

The lauhala practitioner's artistry emerges during weaving (technically plaiting because no loom is used). Lifting alternating vertical strips while simultaneously setting a horizontal strip in place sounds much easier than it is. In old Hawai'i, students silently learned by observing their teachers and imitating their actions. Mastery of lauhala plaiting requires decades of practice. A master artisan's creation is said to be imbued with his or her *mana* (spiritual essence) and can be identified by unique patterns as distinctive as fingerprints.

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—KUPUNA UNCLE
ROY BENHAM

Hawaiians used hala leaves—lauhala—for thatching or to weave durable ground mats, pillows, bedding, baskets, and canoe sails. (Opposite) A hala lei atop a lauhala box.

Lauhala plaiting rose to new heights of mastery in the hands of Hawaiians. Today, handcrafted *papale lauhala* (hala hats) from Hawai‘i are highly prized by collectors around the world. Depending upon design, a single hat can cost anywhere from \$200 to \$5,000.

Hala also provides something that money can’t buy: health and well-being.

Kahu Kapi‘ioho‘okalani Lyons Naone, a Maui *kahuna la‘au lapa‘au* (Hawaiian plant practitioner), grew up in Kīpahulu, just south of Hāna, famed for its lush hala groves. Now a *kepuna* (elder), Kahu recalls helping his grandmother gather lauhala from a sacred grove near Wai‘anapanapa. When he was just two, she chose him to inherit her knowledge of Hawaiian plant medicine.

“Hala can treat a variety of ailments,” he tells me. “The root, called *ule* or *uleule*, is used to cure asthma, colds, any kind of chest congestion. We mash the root tips and combine the paste with *nuhōlani* (eucalyptus), *wāpīne* (lemon grass), and *maile hohono* (whiteweed or floss flower) to make a steam bath. Inhaling the steam clears the lungs and purifies the body through the skin. We also mix pounded ule with *kō* (sugar cane) and other ingredients to make a tonic to strengthen new mothers after childbirth. For children, hala fruit is used to treat diseases like *‘ea* (thrush) and *pa‘ao‘ao* (physical weakness).”

The metaphorical Hawaiian language often assigns multiple meanings to words and hala is no exception. It can also mean sin, offense, error, and vice; or it can describe a completion, passing, and transition. Because *kahuna la‘au lapa‘au* treat both physical and spiritual disorders, Kahu has uses to help reluctant spirits as well.

“Hawaiians believe that after death, the spirit of the deceased stays nearby for a year,” he says. “On the death anniversary there is a ceremony that liberates their spirit to *pō* (the afterlife). But sometimes the spirit refuses to leave. A lei made of hala fruit is hung in the place where the spirit lingers to communicate it is time to go to the afterlife. This lei is a symbol of passage, not death, but because of this ritual, people can misunderstand the lei’s meaning.”

Hawaiians also prize hala as a desired love charm like the red hala fruit lei described in the Hawaiian proverb, “*A pala ka hala, ‘ula ka ‘a‘i*” (When the hala is ripe, necks are red). Or less poetically, it’s a good time for lovemaking. Not so coincidentally, Polynesians have long used the pollen of the male tree as a potent aphrodisiac. Many an unsuspecting *wahine* of old discovered a suitor had sprinkled fragrant *hīnano* on her sleeping mat.

Kupuna Uncle Roy Benham is Hawai‘i’s most eminent maker of the uncommonly beautiful hala lei. The 89-year-old retired educator was born and raised in the O‘ahu plantation town of Kahuku, steeped in Hawaiian culture. As a young man, he learned to make the sophisticated “Hāna cut” lei fashioned from carved hala fruit.

Like lauhala plaiting, hala lei-making is an intricate process. “For the Hāna cut lei, I select the most brilliant yellow, orange, or red fruit and separate it into individual keys,” Uncle Roy explains. “I carefully slice each ridge of the pod so it looks like a fiery little blossom. I figure out where the seed ends and then I trim the pod and string the lei.”

Uncle Roy’s lei are mostly reserved for significant occasions such as graduations, weddings, career promotions, or to adorn a victorious candidate on election night. He also affirms Kahu’s assertion that hala lei signify rites of passage. “The hala lei is a Hawaiian’s last lei,” he says. “We place it in the coffin to celebrate the greatest passage of all, the transition to the glorious life after death.”

