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"May Day is Lei Day"

Leis have been an important part of Hawaiian culture since the first Polynesian settlers came to the islands. They have been celebrated in ancient chants and are often featured in modern songs. They are a "tangible expression of aloha, and as such are given to show love, joy, or sympathy, and as greetings and farewells." (quote from keolamagazine.com)

Since 1928, May 1st has been celebrated as **Lei Day** throughout the Hawaiian islands. This annual tribute to the lei includes hula dancing, parades, lei-making contests, Hawaiian songs, and more.



On May 1, 2001, Hawai'i Senator Daniel Kahikina Akaka said, "Lei Day is a nonpolitical and nonpartisan celebration. Indeed, its sole purpose is to engage in random acts of kindness and sharing, and to celebrate the Aloha spirit, that intangible, but palpable, essence which is best exemplified by the hospitality and inclusiveness exhibited by the Native Hawaiians -- Hawai'i's indigenous peoples -- to all people of goodwill."



Leis are not just for tourists. It is customary to bring a lei for birthdays, graduation, retirement, prom, and any other festive occasion . . . or "just because". They are also given as a token of welcome or goodbye (including funerals).

Last week my book club had a party for my birthday, and to celebrate the retirement of another member. We both received a variety of beautiful leis from our friends.

Flower leis are the best-known. But leis can also be made out of leaves, vines, shells, seeds, feathers, nuts, fabric, or ribbons.

Leis are either made as a closed circle, or open-ended (as shown below.) A lei worn on the head (in the photo on the left) is called a haku lei.

Leis are not just for women. Men also wear flower leis, as well as leis made of kukui nuts, or leaves. Grooms often wear maile leis, which are open-ended vine leis.

Most high school and college graduates in Hawaii wear a lei (or MANY, MANY, MANY leis) along with their cap and gown. And it is very common for Hawaiian politicians to wear leis at official events.

LEI ETIQUETTE

1. A closed lei is worn on the shoulders, draped with half of the lei in the front, and half in the back. It should not be worn around the neck like a necklace. The center of an open lei should be behind the neck. Both ends should hang loosely and evenly down the front.
2. It is disrespectful to refuse a lei when it is offered to you. And you should continue to wear it while in the giver's presence.
3. It is bad luck to wear a lei that you will be giving to someone else.
4. It is OK to make or to purchase a lei for yourself. You can wear a lei at any time; no special occasion is needed.
5. Don't give a closed lei to a pregnant woman, as it is unlucky for the baby. Only give her an open-ended lei.
6. It is OK to wear a lei more than once. It can be misted and kept in a plastic bag in the refrigerator to help keep it fresh.



P.S. Since the Hawaiian language doesn't differentiate between singular and plural . . . the correct plural of the word "lei" is actually "lei". But, even if it is technically incorrect, "leis" is more commonly used in English.