

Hawaii and its Medicinal Plants

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How did Hawaiians take care of their health before Westerners first arrived in the Hawaiian Islands with the medical treatments we are all now so accustomed to?

Quite well, actually.

It's interesting to note that traditional Hawaiian health care includes much more than just medicine. In Hawaiian thought, illness stems from an imbalance in the physical, mental or emotional, and spiritual areas. Kahuna, or traditional healers, might make use of lomilomi (massage), pule (prayer), and ho'oponopono (conflict resolution), as well as [la'au lapa'au](#), or herbal or plant-based healing. Everything works together.

Here's a look at some of the plants Hawaiians have traditionally, and often still, use for healing. You can see many of these plants at Hawaii Tropical Botanical Garden.

['Awa](#) (*Piper methysticum*) is also commonly called kava. This [canoe plant](#) is a large, rounded shrub with segmented branches that grows from 4 to 12 feet tall. In different preparations, it can treat insomnia, thrush and fungal disease, kidney problems, trouble urinating, chills, headaches, menstrual problems, and respiratory congestion. It's most commonly known as a relaxant, and is used in ceremonies.

[Kī](#) (*Cordyline fruticosa*) is also known as ti. It is also a canoe plant and in different preparations treats various ailments. Sometimes its flowers or leaf buds are mixed with specific other plants, and occasionally kī leaves are placed on the body or stripped and worn as a lei. Kī is used to treat quite a wide range of medical issues, including headaches, asthma, phlegm, and any others.

[Ko'oko'olau](#) (*Bidens*, 19 species) is an annual or perennial herb or shrub that is commonly made into a tea and used as a general tonic. The entire plant, prepared variously, can be used for cleansing and purification, appetite restoration, throat and stomach problems, asthma, and more.

[Kukui](#) (*Aleurites moluccana*) is also known as the candlenut tree. This canoe plant is a tree that grows to 25 meters tall and has a silvery-gray powder on its leaves. Various parts of the plant, prepared in specific ways, are used to treat infections and infected sores, among other problems. To build strength after an illness, for instance, you grind the nutmeat with cooked kalo and the flesh of kikawalioa, and eat that with fish, poi 'uala, and a ko'oko'olau infusion.

[Māmaki](#) (*Pipturus*, 4 species) is an endemic shrub or small tree with hard wood. Its leaves make a tea that serves as a tonic. Part of the māmaki fruit is used to treat infection.

[Noni](#) (*Morinda citrifolia*). Also called Indian mulberry, this canoe plant grows as a small to medium-sized tree or shrub. Noni is a significant medicinal plant in Hawai'i with a strong, disagreeable smell. Some eat the fruit, o



parts of the plant are used – from the leaves’ sap and the berries’ juice to the leaf buds steeped with salt or in conjunction with other plants.

The University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa’s Department of Botany produced this 52-minute video, [An Introduction to Ethnobotany](#). It’s well worth a watch. The title is La‘au Lapa‘au: Traditional Hawaiian Herbal Healthcare.

To read more about Hawaiian medicinal plants, check out this older but still great list of references compiled by the [Hawaii Medical Library](#).

mash it and drink the juice. You can prepare it in various ways and use it to treat boils, bruises, sores, wounds, concussions, broken bones, muscle and joint pain, and skin eruptions. People also use the leaves, applied topically or sometimes burned or mashed; the fruit; the bark, and the root sap. The University of Hawaii Cancer Center has discovered and conducted clinical studies on noni’s [anti-cancer properties](#).

[Olena](#) (*Curcuma longa*), or turmeric, is another [canoe plant](#). Depending on how you prepare it and what you mix it with, this herb can be used to heal nasal ailments or to treat the blood, among other uses. A preparation of its sap can be a mild astringent or cure earache.

[Pōpolo](#) (*Solanum americanum*) or glossy nightshade. It is an annual herb, with a blackish-purple fruit, that spreads wide and grows up to 1.2 m tall. Many



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