

Acacia koa

[Synonyms : *Acacia heterophylla*, *Acacia kauaiensis*, *Acacia koa* var. *hawaiiensis*, *Acacia koa* var. *lanaiensis*, *Acacia koa* var. *waimeae*, *Acacia koaia*, *Racosperma koa*]

KOA (English, Hawaiian) is an evergreen tree. Native to Hawaii it has small balls of pale yellow flowers with long stamens.

It is also known as Canoe tree, Koa acacia, and *Koai`a* (Hawaiian).

It is interesting to note that although ants are not native to Hawaii, experiments carried out by scientists have shown that they are attracted to parts of these flowers.

Koa is a Hawaiian name for the plant and is said to mean ‘warrior’.

In Hawaii, if the ocean currents from the American coast were unobliging and failed to deliver up suitable driftwood in the form of whole trunks of Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) or sequoia redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*) when needed, koa logs were used to make canoes. The sailing and war canoes, including those used for very long journeys demanded hulls of considerable length and width and these would be fashioned from one long trunk – anything from 50-150 ft. (Even today apparently the rare forest tree found with a long stretch of unbranched trunk can still be referred to by Hawaiians as a ‘canoe tree’.) The Hawaiians also used the wood for grasshouse frames and for smaller items such as spears, decorative paddles or ukeleles. The heavy, durable, light to dark brown wood is still in demand today worldwide, not least because of its unique grain (especially when it is curly not straight) and its often striking colouring. (In the past when this wood was used for furniture it was sometimes referred to as ‘Hawaiian mahogany’ even though the tree comes from a different family and bears little resemblance to mahogany, *Swietenia mahagoni*.) Nowadays koa wood is used for building interiors, for veneering and for making furniture, gunstocks and musical instruments (such as ceremonial drums, ukeleles and violins), as well as ornamental boxes which display its beauty and other tourist souvenirs which are often polished.

The original stands of koa on Hawaii are non-existent now. Historians recall how India was over harvesting her sandalwood (*Santalum album*) to such devastating effect by the beginning of the 19th Century that traders were hungry for another source of equivalent hardwood and descended upon Hawaii. Captain Cook (1728-1779) had only discovered the Islands about twenty years earlier and the Hawaiian chieftains were persuaded by an influx of opportunistic sea captains and merchants to fell their hardwood forests. During that Century thousands and thousands of tons of heartwood (sandalwood and koa) were transported by the sailing ships from Hawaii to Asia, not least the Indian sub-continent, and to Europe – and the Hawaiian forests never recovered from this deforestation. Add to this the effects of the attentions of wild life (wild pigs in particular), as well as unskilled logging and deforestation on the lower mountain slopes for agriculture and grazing cattle, and the plight of the tree is even more apparent. In fact its scarcity today is well illustrated by the fact that it is economically viable to justify so-called ‘helicopter logging’. But there are authorities who state that the tree, despite these ravages, is still the second most common in Hawaii and in more recent years attempts are being made to cultivate koa plantations. These tend to be sited on areas reclaimed from decades of intensive cattle grazing – but authorities express concern that more research on their

establishment and management is needed.

The decline of koa has had serious effects on some of the wildlife in Hawaii. Authorities note that the existence of at least three indigenous birds, for which the tree provides habitat, is now threatened.

In the past Hawaiian women obtained a dye from the bark which they applied to bark cloth, especially that made from the paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*). In more recent times this bark has been used locally for tanning.

The shiny dark brown to black seeds are still strung in Hawaiian necklaces.

Medicinally the Hawaiians not only used the leaves spread under the patient to cause sweating but also included this plant in ashes applied to the interior of a young child's mouth to counter physical weakness.