

“CANOE” PLANTS & TREES FOUND IN HQ PACAF’S COURTYARD OF HEROES

A “canoe” plant or tree is one that was brought to the Hawaiian Islands by the first Polynesian settlers long before western contact. Since the settlers came by canoe, these non-native species are often called “canoe” plants and trees to distinguish them from those that were introduced to the islands later.

Kukui (Candlenut tree)

At the far (back) wall of the Courtyard of Heroes, you’ll find a thriving kukui, or “Candlenut Tree.” Although this tree is originally native to Malaysia and western Polynesia, it now Hawaii’s official state tree. Today this tree commonly grows wild in the lower mountain forest areas in Hawaii; it is also planted in gardens as a shade tree, although it is a bit messy due to dropping its leaves and nuts (up to 100 pounds per tree).

The greenish orb is the part of the plant that contains the nut (or seed). Originally, the nut was most valued in Hawaii for its light -- the oil of the white kernels was extracted for its use in stone lamps and in ti leaf sheath torches. The shelled nuts were also skewered on the middle rib of a coconut frond and then each one lit, one by one, from the top to bottom. Often children were given the responsibility for keeping these “candles” lit.



Other ways kukui has been traditionally used in Hawaii include: making a red-brown dye for cloth and cordage from the inner bark; making a black dye for tattooing and painting designs on cloth using the soot of burned nuts; using the soft wood of the tree trunk for canoes; using the nut oil to make a varnish (similar to linseed oil); using different parts of the tree for medicinal purposes; using the oil as a skin care emollient.

A small amount of the roasted nuts, when pounded and mixed with salt (and sometimes chili pepper), is used as a relish in traditional Hawaiian cuisine.

The nuts have been, and still are, widely used to make personal decorations. People polish the hard shells of the mature black, tan or brown nuts and string them into traditional Hawaiian lei, or more contemporary costume jewelry.

Probably the most unusual use of kukui nuts – perhaps one you might want to check out for yourself -- was as a fisherman’s aid. Traditionally, Hawaiian fishermen would first roast and pulverize kukui nuts (either by pounding or by chewing with their teeth). They would then cast the results onto the ocean – where it created a film that could increase a fisherman’s ability to see under the water when the ocean wasn’t smooth.

(All photos in this document were taken by U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt Gustavo Gonzalez)

Information for this document came from:

www.canoepplants.com/kukui.html (accessed 8/11/11)

www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/forestry/trees/CommonTreesHI/CFT_Aleurites_moluccana.pdf (accessed 8/11/11)

data.bishopmuseum.org/ethnobotanydb/ethnobotany.php?b=d&ID=kukui (accessed 8/11/11)