

kauila, kauwila (*Alphitonia ponderosa auwahiensis*)

RHAMNACEAE, buckthorn family



This species is endemic to Kaua`i, O`ahu, Moloka`i, Lāna`i, Maui, and Hawai`i island (Wagner *et al.* 1990).

Hillebrand (1888) cited the Hawaiian name *kauwila* for both *Alphitonia ponderosa* and *Colubrina oppositifolia*, a treatment often followed today (e.g. Pukui and Elbert 1986). According to Rock (1913), another Hawaiian name for this species on Maui is o`a. However, Neal (1965) and Pukui and Elbert (1986) stated that o`a is a Maui name for *Colubrina oppositifolia*.

Summary statement of uses: Wood of this species was used in making weapons, kapa tools, agricultural tools (especially `ō`ō), images (ki`i), and fishing lures.

Hillebrand (1888) stated of this species, "The wood is remarkable for close grain, hardness and heavy weight, on which account the natives preferred it for making spears, mallets for beating 'kapa' and other tools. It turns black with age.". *Kauila* was by far the preferred wood for spears, but *mamane*, *uhiuhi*, and *koa* were also used. Malo (1903) mentions `olapa and lo`ulu palm wood for spears. *Kauila* was valued for its strength and relative weight as well as its ability for a point to remain sharp and unbroken. *Kauila* and *koai`a* were favored in making the squared edge mallet used for the second beating of Hawaiian kapa, the *i`e kuku*.

Kamakau (1976) also describes the use of *kauila*, o`a, *koai`e*, and *hame* (= *mēhame*) woods in making `ō`ō, or digging sticks. A more detailed description is given under *koai`e*.

Kamakau (1976) writes of an `ō`ō of kauila in a chant for Kū:

E `ike mai ia`u i kālai `ō`ō
He kauila ka `ō`ō mahi`ai au i ka `āina kula
He `uala ka `ai

Look toward me as I carve an `ō`ō,
An `ō`ō of kauila to be used on kula lands,
To plant sweet potatoes for food

Buck (1957j) describes the use of kauila wood (often as the preferred choice) in construction of polulu (long spears), ihe (short spears), pahoa (single-, double-pointed, and truceon daggers), and shark-tooth weapons.

Regarding its preferred use in ki`i (images), Abbott (1992:114) wrote, "Art historians Halley Cox and William Davenport who have published the most complete study of this subject (1988), indicate that kauila was the most frequently used wood after `ōhi`a , especially Colubrina oppositifolia, which they believe can be distinguished from Alphitonia ponderosa on the basis of finer grain and greater natural luster. Kou served as a material for small figures, and a few images display the contrasting colors in its grain to great advantage."

Summers (1990:41) wrote that kauila, koai`e, kōlea, kāwa`u, hōlei, māmane, and nā`ū were among the woods used in making lā`au kahi loon or papa olonā, the long slender thin hardwood boards used for scraping olonā.

Kamakau (1976) and Buck (1957g) described the use of o`a and other hard woods (koai`e, `a`ali`i, pua) for the making of melomelo sticks used in a type of fishing involving attracting fish with the melomelo stick which "had been rubbed with coconut meat, kukui nuts, and all sorts of strong-scented things, and roasted over a fire until it was black." Fish swarmed to nibble at the melomelo stick and were caught using several canoes and a series of nets.

Kauila, as well as other dryland forest trees `ahakea, alahe`e, `iliahi (as `aoa), naio, neneleau `ūlei, and wiliwili are mentioned in the Hawaiian creation chant, Kūmulipo (Beckwith 1972). The kauila tree is matched with the kauila eel (Beckwith 1972).

Lennox (1967) wrote of this species, "Used for spears, javelins, kapa beaters, bearing sticks, kahili handles."

Status at Auwahi: Perhaps one hundred to two hundred and fifty individuals of Alphitonia survive at Auwahi and adjacent Kanaio district. Dead trunks of this species with straight trunks up to forty feet tall indicate a taller forest structure than now exists in these areas.