

Expanding Tree Diversity in Hawai'i's Landscapes

Maga, *Thespesia grandiflora*

The national tree of Puerto Rico, this relative of hibiscus and milo reaches about 50 feet in height at maturity by about 20 feet across; however, trees observed in Hawai'i are smaller. The bark is dark and deeply furrowed. The durable hard wood is used for fence posts and furniture, and is reported to be termite resistant. Its showy red cup-shaped flowers shine against the dark green foliage.

Recommended Use in Landscape

- Specimen tree
- Flowering tree
- Shade tree
- Parks and gardens

Distribution

- Endemic to Puerto Rico on the lower slopes and valleys of limestone hills

Propagation Techniques

- Seed (short-lived; plant soon after harvest)
- Air layers
- Cuttings

Cultural Requirements and Tolerances

- Full sun to partial shade
- Moist but well-drained soil
- Soil tolerances from mildly alkaline to strongly acid
- Said to be tolerant of saline soils
- Likes moisture, as it is from the humid tropics
- Tolerates coastal conditions
- Medium nutrient requirement
- Prune to shape and reduce weak branch angles



Figure 1. This Maga tree on the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa campus is dedicated to the late Dr. Walter Mauer, a professor of Sanskrit.

Flower and Fruit Characteristics

- Red to pink, five-petalled flowers up to six inches across, with prominent pistil. Pendent on long stems.
- Fruits are leathery and rounded, similar to milo but larger, with three or four seeds.

Leaf Characteristics

- Alternate arrangement on stems
- Shiny, evergreen, heart-shaped with a long petiole
- Up to eight inches in length

Advantages of Use in Landscapes

- Flowers are eye-catching in their beauty
- Year-round flowering
- HWRA score of -4 (low risk)
- Good for coastal conditions, withstanding winds and salt spray
- No major insect pests; termite resistant

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Figure 2, above and below. Maga is related to Hau and Milo — and like them, is tolerant to coastal conditions.



Disadvantages of Use in Landscapes

- Tendency to develop narrow crotch angles with a potential for splitting or breaking in strong wind. Might need judicious pruning and training to develop proper structure when young.
- After heavy flowering, fallen blossoms can create some litter, so do not plant near a sidewalk.
- Susceptible to certain insect pests in its native habitat. Currently, these are not present in Hawai'i.



Figure 3. The Maga leaf has a petiole nearly as long as the leaf blade itself.