

Alahe'e

Canthium odoratum (G. Forst.) Seem.

Madder or coffee family (Rubiaceae)

Native species (endemic)

This common handsome shrub or small tree of wide distribution in dry lowlands has a round crown or shiny bright green leaves, which are paired, small, and elliptical, the small fragrant white flowers, and small rounded black fruits. To 20 ft (6 m) high and 4 inches (10 cm) in trunk diameter, smaller in exposed areas. Trunk very straight, erect, with distinctly horizontal branches. Bark light to dark gray, smoothish; inner bark pale yellow or light brown, slightly bitter. Twigs hairless, green when young, slightly four-angled with rings at enlarged nodes, becoming gray and slightly scaly.

Leaves opposite, hairless, with short yellowish or light green leafstalks $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (3 mm) long and paired small pointed scales (stipules) at base. Blades elliptical, $1\frac{1}{4}$ – $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches (3–6 cm) long and $\frac{5}{8}$ – $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches (1.5–3 cm) wide, slightly thickened and leathery, blunt at both ends and slightly turned under at edges, above shiny green with few fine veins, beneath dull light green.

Flower clusters (cymose corymbs) less than 1 inch (2.5 cm) long at leaf bases, flattened. Flowers many, fragrant, on slender stalks $\frac{5}{16}$ inch (8 mm) long, composed of green base (hypanthium) less than $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (3 mm) long bearing five calyx teeth and tubular white corolla $\frac{3}{16}$ inch (5 mm) long bearing five finely hairy lobes meeting at edges in bud; five short stamens attached in notches of corolla; and pistil with inferior two-celled ovary, slender style, and slightly two-lobed stigma.

Fruits (drupes) rounded, $\frac{5}{16}$ inch (8 mm) in diameter, black, with calyx ring at apex, juicy, containing two stones or nutlets.

Wood whitish or light brown, very hard, reported to be durable. Hawaiians used it for tools in tilling the soil and for adze blades for cuffing softer woods such as kukui and wiliwili.

It is reported that the leaves provided a black dye. Common and widespread in dry areas from sea level to 3800 ft (1158 m) altitude through the islands, even on exposed windswept slopes.

Special areas

Waimea Arboretum, Wahiawa, Bishop Museum, Kamehameha School Hawaiian Garden, Volcanoes

Champion

Height 39 ft (11.9 m), c.b.h. 3.7 ft (1.1 m), spread 18 ft (5.5 m). Puuwaawaa, Kailua-Kona, Hawaii (1968).

Range

Through Hawaiian Islands, and in Polynesia but not New Zealand, New Hebrides, or Fiji. One of several native tree species not confined or endemic to Hawaii.

Other common names

walahe'e, plectronia, 'ohe'e

Botanical synonym

Plectronia odorata (G. Forst.) F. Muell.



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Canthium odoratum (G. Forst.) Seem.
Flowering twig, fruits (upper left), 1 X