

‘Ōlapa, common cheirodendron

Cheirodendron trigynum (Gaud.) Heller

Ginseng or aralia family (Araliaceae)

Native species (endemic)

‘Ōlapa, an aromatic medium-sized evergreen tree common in wet forests through the Hawaiian Islands. It is characterized by paired large palmate leaves with 3–5 finely toothed elliptical or ovate leaflets, constantly moving on their long slender stalks. The crushed foliage and bark have a strong odor like that of carrot or oil and a spicy or turpentine taste.

A tree to 40–50 ft (12–15 m) high and 2 ft (0.6 m) in trunk diameter, with rounded open crown, hairless throughout. Bark gray, smoothish or sometimes rough and scaly. Inner bark greenish white, slightly spicy, aromatic. Twigs stout, enlarged and ringed at nodes, green or purplish, becoming brownish, weak and brittle.

Leaves opposite, 4–8 inches (10–20 cm) long, palmate or digitate, with very slender green, purplish or brownish leafstalks of 2–4 inches (5–10 cm), slightly flattened, enlarged and slightly clasping at base. Leaflets 3–5 (7), spreading on slender slightly flattened stalks of $\frac{3}{8}$ –1½ inches (1–4 cm) long. Blades elliptical or ovate 2–5 inches (5–13 cm) long and 1¼–2¼ inches (3–6 cm) wide: rounded or blunt with narrow curved point at apex, straight to blunt at base, edges mostly with small curved teeth or sometimes none, thin or slightly thickened, upper surface shiny green with fine side veins, lower surface dull light green.

Flower clusters (panicles) terminal, 3–6 inches (7.5–15 cm) long, with many slender forking greenish or purplish branches and many flowers spreading on, equal stalks (umbels). Flowers $\frac{3}{16}$ inch (5 mm) long and wide, greenish, composed of cuplike base (hypanthium) $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (3 mm) long, calyx of five tiny teeth, five narrow spreading petals $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (3 mm) long, five short stamens, and pistil with inferior ovary commonly 3–4-celled and 3–4 dotlike stigmas.

Fruits (berries) round, about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch (6 mm) in diameter, blackish, with ring of calyx and stigmas at apex, purplish flesh juice or slightly bitter. Seeds (nutlets) 3–4, more than $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (3 mm) long, brown.

The wood is pale yellow without distinct heartwood, moderately heavy, and moderately hard. It burns when green.

A bluish dye for coloring tapa, or bark cloth, was obtained from the fruits, leaves, and bark. Fruits eaten by native birds such as the rare ‘ō‘o, ‘ō‘u, and ‘ōma‘o. The wood was used for bird hunting spears. Distinctive leis can be made by binding or tying together the compound leaves.

The Hawaiian term for graceful dancers is also ‘olapa. Performers of the native hula dance were divided into two groups, the ‘ōlapa and ho‘opa‘a. The ‘ōlapa were the dancers, perhaps because their movements were like the fluttering movement of the tree leaves. The ho‘opa‘a stayed in one place, chanting and playing musical instruments.

Common and widespread through the Hawaiian Islands, mostly in wet forests at 2000–7000 ft (610–2134 m) altitude. It is the most prevalent understory tree in the forest on Hawaii in the zone within 1000–4500 ft (305–1372 m), where koa and ‘ohi‘a commonly intermix.

Special areas

Haleakala, Volcanoes, Kipuka Puaulu

Champion

Height 37 ft (11.3 m), c.b.h. 4.5 ft (1.4 m), spread 28 ft (8.5 m). Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, Hawaii (1968).

Range

Hawaiian Islands only

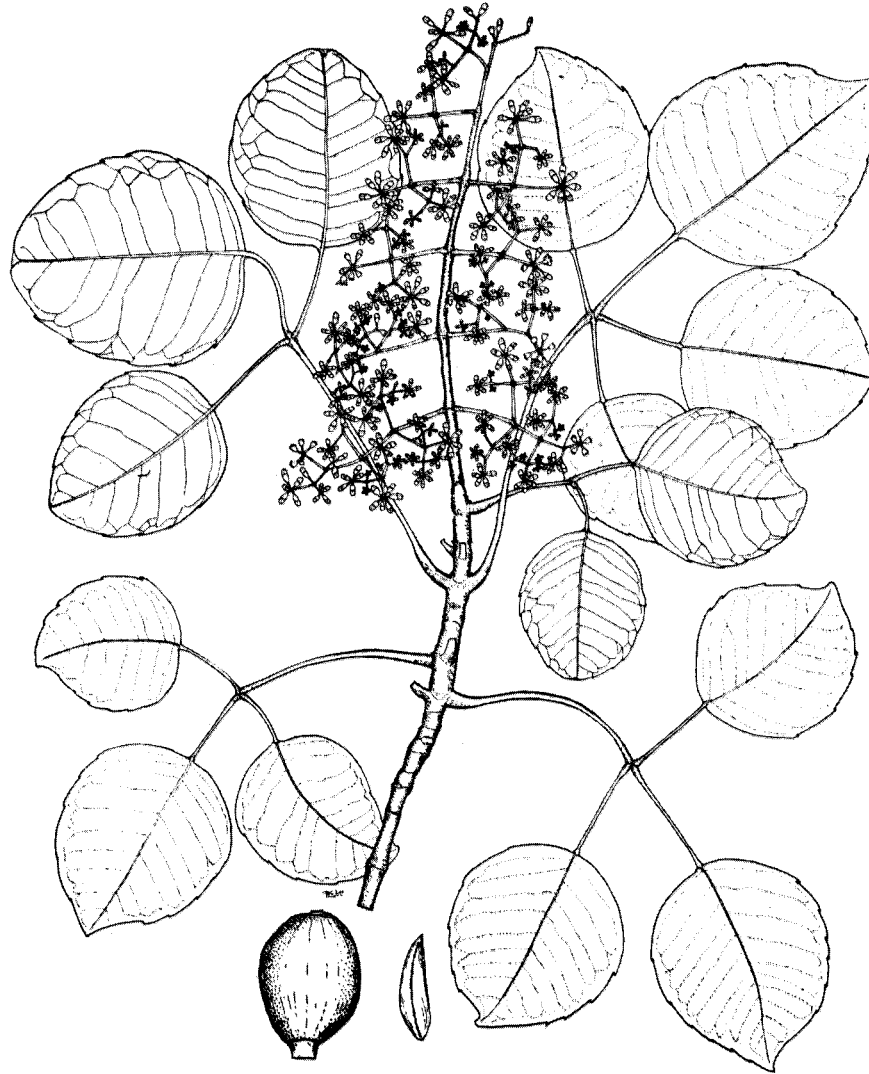
Other common names

‘olapalapa, mahu, kauila mahu

Botanical synonym

Cheirodendron gaudichaudii (DC.) Seem.

Many varieties of this species have been named but currently are not accepted. The generic name *Cheirodendron*, from Greek hand and tree, refers to the palmate or digitate leaves with five leaflets like fingers in a hand.



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Flowering twig, $\frac{1}{3}$ X; fruit and nutlet (below), 3 X (Degener)