

Kou

Cordia subcordata Lam.

Borage family (Boraginaceae)

Native species (indigenous)

Small evergreen tree with broad crown, uncommon along shores, apparently introduced by the early Hawaiians. Characterized by large broadly ovate to elliptical blunt-pointed leaves and showy large funnel-shaped orange flowers. To about 26 ft (7 m) high and 15 inches (38 cm) in trunk diameter, reported to reach somewhat larger size formerly. Bark gray, thick rough, furrowed into narrow ridges. Twigs stout, light gray, sometimes hairy, with raised half-round leaf-scars.

Leaves alternate, with long stout leafstalks 1½–4 inches (4–10 cm) long. Blades broadly ovate to elliptical, 3–7 inches (7.5–18 cm) long and 2–5 inches (5–13 cm) wide, blunt at apex, rounded or unequally short-pointed at base, often slightly wavy on edges, thin, above shiny or dull green with few long yellowish veins and hairless, beneath dull light green with raised veins and fine whitish hairs mostly along veins and in vein angles. Leaves turn bright yellow and dark brown before falling.

Flower clusters (cymes or panicles) terminal and lateral, short, about 2 inches (5 cm) long. Flowers several, short-stalked, showy, about 1¼ inches (4 cm) long and broad. Calyx cylindrical, fleshy, yellow green, ⅝ inch (15 mm) long, with 3–5 short broad teeth; corolla orange, funnel-shaped with 5–7 rounded slightly wrinkled lobes; stamens 5–7, threadlike, opposite, inserted in tube and slightly longer; and pistil with conical 4-celled ovary and slender orange style branched twice near apex.

Fruits (drupes) several, egg-shaped, 1 inch (2.5 cm) long, enclosed by the brown calyx with teeth and base of style at apex, green, becoming dry and brown, with large hard stone. Seeds four or fewer, white, about ½ inch (13 mm) long, narrow.

Sapwood is pale yellowish brown and heartwood is light brown prominently marked by dark brown or black streaks in the growth rings. Figure resembles that of “Circassian” walnut. Lightweight (sp. gr. 0.45), soft, easily worked, durable, and takes a fine polish. It was used by the Hawaiians for their handsome bowls, cups, and dishes. The wood was favored for utensils because it did not impart a flavor to foods as do koa and other

native woods. It is still used occasionally for craftwood but is in very short supply.

Formerly, this very useful tree was more common as a shade tree of rapid growth around houses and along the shore. The flowers were made into necklaces or leis, and the seeds were eaten. Many trees were destroyed by moths.

In Hawaii, scattered through the islands along shores, both humid and arid, and planted as an ornamental. Recorded from Niihau. As further evidence of introduction, Degener noted that fossil pollen of this species had not been found in Hawaii and that no peculiar or endemic insects were found on the trees here.

Trees may be seen at Kualoa Beach, Maui Zoological and Botanical Garden, and in many other places. One of the largest kou trees in Hawaii grows in front of the Pauhana Inn at Kaunakakai, Molokai.

Special areas

Waimea Arboretum, Foster, lolani, City

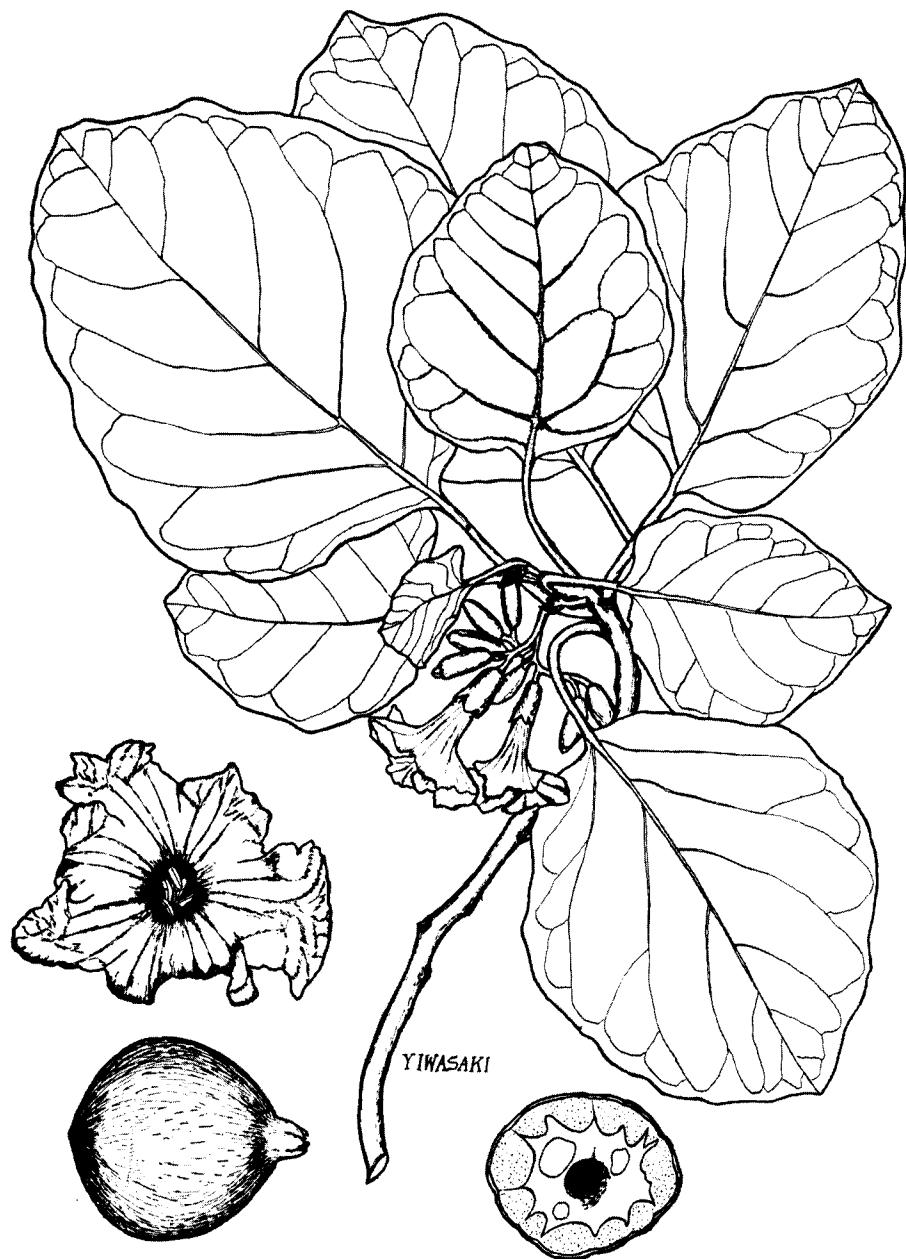
Range

Now cultivated and established from eastern Africa and tropical Asia through Malaya to tropical Australia and Pacific Islands. Probably distributed to Hawaii and other islands by early inhabitants as well as by ocean currents.

Kou is often confused with the more recently introduced kou-haole or Geiger-tree, *Cordia sebestena* L., which is smaller in size and has smaller, rough textured leaves, white fruit, and darker orange flowers.

Other common names

koa (Guam); niyoron (N. Marianas); kalau (Palau); galu (Yap); anau (Truk); ikoik (Pohnpei); ikoak (Kosrae); tauanave (Am. Samoa)



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Cordia subcordata Lam.
Flowering twig, 1/2 X; flower and fruit
(lower left), 1 X (Degener)