

## Ti, common dracaena

*Cordyline fruticosa* (L.) Chev.

Agave family (Agavaceae)

Polynesian introduction

Ti (pronounced “tea”) is an evergreen shrubby plant apparently introduced by the early Hawaiians for its many uses. It is related to halapepe or golden dracaena, *Pleomele aurea*, which it resembles slightly. Characterized by a slender trunk, few wide-spreading branches (none when small), and clusters of many very large, longstalked narrowly oblong or lance-shaped leaves crowded in spiral.

A shrub or small tree to 15 ft (4.6 m) high with light gray smoothish trunk to 3 inches (7.5 cm) in diameter, becoming warty and slightly cracked, with horizontal rings, not divided into bark and wood. Within the thin brown outer layer, the trunk is whitish, soft, and bitter.

Leaves are alternate but very crowded in a spiral at end of erect stout hairless branch, with stout grooved greenish leafstalk of 2–4 inches (5–10 cm), hairless. Blades narrowly oblong, 7–18 inches (18–45 cm) long and 2–4 inches (5–10 cm) wide, broadest near middle and gradually narrowed to long-pointed ends, not toothed on edges, thin and flexible, with many long fine parallel veins, shiny green on both surfaces, leaving a ring scar.

Flower clusters (panicles) large, arising from center of cluster of leaves, 12–15 inches (30–38 cm) long, curved and branched. Flowers many, stalkless on slender drooping branches, from narrow whitish buds ½ inch (13 mm) long, tinged with purple, composed of narrow calyx whitish tube with six pointed lobes curled back, six yellow spreading stamens inserted in throat, and white pistil with three-celled ovary and slender style.

Fruits (berries) rarely formed, about ¼ inch (6 mm) in diameter, yellow, turning to bright red. Seeds few, shiny black.

This species served the original inhabitants in many ways. The papery leaves provided food wrapping, plates, drinking cups, bandages, leis, religious symbols, and thatch for roofs and walls of houses. They were made into raincoats and sandals. In the late 1800s, King Kalakaua introduced from the Gilbert Islands a technique of shredding the leaves into skirts for dancing the hula. Whistles and flute-like musical instruments were made from rolled strips of fresh leaf. The leaves provided fodder for livestock also. The entire leafy stem

was and still is used as a sled for “ti leaf sliding.” One sits on the leaf, grasps the stalk, then toboggans down wet hillsides.

The plants have a large tuberous root that weighs as much as 300 pounds (136 kilos) and stores sugar. The edible baked roots have a taste like molasses candy. From the Europeans, the Hawaiians learned to distill brandy and whisky from the baked fermented roots. This beverage called okolehao is sold in stores at present.

Ti plants are favorite ornamentals and are easily propagated from cuttings. Numerous cultivated varieties have been developed with purple, pink, and striped leaves, also red flowers. A table decoration of sprouting leaves and roots is made by placing short stem cuttings in water.

This useful species was the subject of various stories and legends. A hedge of these plants around a house was believed to ward off evil spirits and bring good luck.

Common through the islands at low altitudes, persistent around houses and in open areas bordering wet forests.

### **Special areas**

Waimea Arboretum, Foster, Haleakala, City, Volcanoes, Kipuka Puauulu, Hawaii

### **Range**

Widespread in Pacific Islands, Australia, tropical Asia, and planted through the tropics, the original native range uncertain.

### **Other common names**

ki, la-i, dracaena, common dracaena

### **Botanical synonym**

*Cordyline terminalis* (L.) Kunth.



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Flowering twig, 1/2 X; bud and flowers (below), 2 X (Degener).