



Wiliwili



Erythrina sandwicensis Degener (Fabaceae family)
synonym *E. monosperma* Gaud.

Common names: wiliwili, wiliwilli tree, wilwilli, Hawaiian coral tree, Hawaiian erythrina

Native habitat: arid lowlands and dry forests of all main Hawaiian islands

Characteristics

Wiliwili is a medium-sized, deciduous tree 20–30 ft high and spreading to 20–30 ft wide. Its growth rate is moderate to fast. It has a stout, crooked trunk and shallow-fissured, gray-white bark. The trunk and branches have a few short spines, which become less pronounced with age.

The leaves are up to 3 inches long, slightly hairy on the undersides, and spaced alternately. Each leaf has three broadly triangular, ovate, leathery leaflets. The large, pea-shaped flowers clustered at the branch ends in racemes up to 8 inches long are usually orange-red but may also be yellow, salmon, white, or pale green. Wiliwili flowers are prominent not only due to their size and color but also because they often appear during the period when the leaves have fallen, between late summer and winter, depending on location.

The woody, hairy, light-brown seed pods contain two or three red to yellowish-orange seeds. The pods have wavy indentations around the seeds, giving them an irregular profile (*wili* means to wind or twist in Hawaiian). The seeds are sometimes used in leis and probably are poisonous.

Location

Wiliwili was one of the most common native trees in dry forests at low elevations (200–500 ft) on the leeward sides

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of the Hawaiian Islands. Full light and a well drained soil are essential for good growth. Heavy soils should be amended to improve drainage. Wiliwili has good wind resistance and salt tolerance.

Landscape uses

Wiliwili is one of the showiest of the native Hawaiian trees. With its small and irregular form and attractive flowers, it is a useful specimen tree for home and commercial landscapes. It is a good shade or park tree and is especially appropriate for exposed sites in dry, hot lowland or coastal locations and for water-conserving landscapes. The leaf texture is medium.

Culture

Most problems growing wiliwili come from overwatering or poor drainage. It has minimal maintenance requirements. It may be pruned and trained when young to develop a desired form. Pests include spider mites and Chinese rose beetles. Powdery mildew can be a problem in moist areas.

Wiliwili may be started from seeds, but the flower color of plants grown from seed will be variable. The seeds are hard, and germination is aided by an overnight hot-water soak or scarification by chipping the seedcoat. Wiliwili is easily started from tip cuttings or air-layers, which will preserve the flower color.

Additional notes

The seeds are reported to be poisonous. The soft, light wood has been used for canoe outriggers (*ama*), fishnet floats, and surfboards.

Fred D. Rauch and David Hensley
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