



Ma'ō (Hawaiian Cotton)



Gossypium tomentosum Nutt. ex Seem.

Common names: ma'ō, huluhulu, Hawaiian cotton

Native habitat: Main Hawaiian islands, except the Big Island (Hawaii)

Characteristics

Ma'ō is a low to medium-sized sprawling shrub growing 2–6 ft high and 5–7 ft wide, with an irregular form. It is usually short-lived, lasting three to five years, but its longevity depends upon site conditions and culture. The leaves are silvery-green to gray-green, palmately veined, 3–5 inches in diameter, and rounded, with 3–5 lobes. The plant is coarse-textured. Ma'ō is a prolific bloomer with bright yellow, hibiscus-like flowers 2–3 inches in diameter. The flowers fade to a light green and lack the maroon or purple spot at the flower base that is typical of other cotton species. The fruits are cotton bolls covered with a tan lint and are not particularly attractive in landscape situations.

Location

Ma'ō occurs naturally in hot, dry, windy coastal and near-shore areas. It prefers full sun and grows well in most well drained soils. It tolerates drought, wind, heat, rocky conditions, soil salinity, and salt spray. Clay soils should be amended to improve drainage. Ma'ō will not tolerate excessively wet or flooded conditions.

Landscape uses

Ma'ō may be used as a low hedge plant, a large ground-cover, part of a shrub composition, and in xeriscapes. Its foliage and flowers are interesting and attractive. Adequate room for the plant to grow to its potential should be allowed.

Culture

Periodic pruning is required to prevent the plant from sprawling and to keep it full and bushy. Do not over-water. The plant responds well to moderate levels of nitrogen; excessive fertilization increases the need for pruning, as the plant will become “leggy.” It is responsive to some chemical growth regulators.

Insects and diseases

Problems from chewing insects, scales, mealy bugs, and nematodes may occur sporadically. A leaf spot fungus (*Colletotrichum* sp.) causes dark spots. If the disease occurs, rake up and remove fallen leaves and avoid wetting the foliage to reduce new infection. The fungus can be controlled by most broad-spectrum fungicides.

Propagation

Ma'ō is easily started from seeds. Remove the seeds from the lint. A 24-hour cold-water soak, a hot-water soak, or scarification is beneficial. Cuttings root with difficulty, but air-layers are successful.

Additional notes

Ma'ō has been used in commercial cotton breeding to obtain disease and insect resistance. It is a source of yellow and green dye for kapa (tapa). The flowers may be strung into giant ilima leis, worn in the hair, and used in oshibana. Dried flower calyces and the fuzzy seeds are interesting in dry arrangements.

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