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In The Garden

Rick Barboza

Endemic tree offers utility with beauty

Kolea lau nui

Myrsine lessertiana

Endemic: all of Hawaii except Niihau and Kahoolawe

Description: Stunning trees or large shrubs reaching heights of up to 25 feet. They have extremely glossy, light green leaves that are brilliantly pink when young (liko). One of the most beautiful sights in the wild (or in the landscape) is when all of the branch tip buds begin to show new signs of growth and the tree is covered in pink. The flowers are small, green with purple tinges and emerge from woody knobs along the branches. Once the flowers are pollinated, they develop into tiny black fruit.

Distribution: This endemic tree is normally found in mesic to wet forest and sometimes in subalpine shrub-land from 600 to more than 6,000 feet in elevation on all of the main Hawaiian islands except Niihau and Kahoolawe.

Cultural uses: The strong wood of kolea is used for posts and beams in the construction of hale as well as to make the anvil for beating kapa, while the red sap of the plant is used to make a red dye and the wood charcoal a black dye.

Landscape uses and care: These trees deserve to be grown more and incorporated into more landscapes. Their beauty alone is enough reason, but also to help preserve the plant.

Water daily to help establish the plant, then reduce watering to about twice a week once signs of active growth begin to show. Few pests bother kolea lau nui, but be careful when transplanting because it doesn't like it when its roots are bothered too much. This plant is available at Hui Ku Maoli Ola native plant nursery in 3-gallon pots for \$45.

Also: Studies have found that early Hawaiian settlements in Waimanalo, dating close to A.D. 450, have fire pits with the charcoal of kolea lau nui within them. This shows that back then the plant grew much lower in elevation than it does today. I don't think a Hawaiian person would walk to the 600-foot elevation in Waimanalo (which would be halfway up the pali face) just for firewood or carry down large logs of kolea lau nui to the ocean to burn it to make dye.



HUI KU MAOLI OLA

The kolea tree is dressed in pink when its branches bud with signs of new growth.

The only other reasonable explanation would be that it grew close enough to gather dry wood to make a fire, which would put it much closer to sea level than current populations.

Rick Barboza co-owns Hui Ku Maoli Ola, a native Hawaiian plant nursery, with Matt Schirman. Contact him at 295-7777 or e-mail Rick.CK.Barboza@gmail.com

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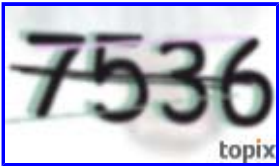
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