



Pa'auilo Mauka Kalopa Community Association

Photo courtesy of Karl Backus

Monthly News & Updates

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October 2022 Newsletter



Plant Pono

***Choosing the
best plants for
our gardens and
for our 'aina.***

Ruth Bennett
PMKCA Vice Prez

Two plant specialists - Chuck Chimera (L), botanist for Hawai'i Invasive Species Council, and Michael Gibson, owner of Elemental Plants and founder of the Hamakua Harvest Market & Agricultural Center.

Home gardening is an occupation that many of us in Hawai'i take great pleasure in. We get a sense of belonging to the 'aina when we grow our own food and beautify our surroundings with plants.

But there's a risk that comes with this simple joy: *How do we know whether a plant that*

we are considering purchasing at a nursery will escape from our garden and wreak havoc in our unique and precious native land? The Hawaiian Islands are called the “invasive species capital of the world.” Every year we learn of a new plant or pest that is threatening the incomparable environment that we love.

Where do we find a guide to the “pono” plants - plants that behave themselves, stay where we plant them and give us goodness without unnecessary risk? Are there nurseries and growers who take special care not to sell invasive plants or disperse dangerous pests in their plant material?

An invasive plant might be very attractive in its pot at a nursery, but some of the plants that have become the most difficult to eradicate in the wild were originally brought to the islands to enhance our home gardens. We have been fighting invasives like pampas grass, the African tulip tree, strawberry guava, and the blue trumpet vine for decades. While it was a wonderful victory, it was only with great effort and expense that pampas grass was recently eliminated on Hawai'i Island.

A nursery that we might be wandering through isn't breaking any laws when it displays an invasive plant for sale. The nursery isn't obligated to warn us of the consequences should that plant become established in the wild. The nursery also isn't required to practice methods to reduce the chance of transporting other invasive pests on their plants. (*Note: It's always a good practice to have an “isolation area” at your home to check plants and plant materials for pests like Little Fire Ants.*)

A recent survey of Hawai'i Island consumers found that over 90% of us would not consciously choose to buy an invasive plant, but the survey also showed that we often didn't know how to distinguish the destructive invasives from the native or introduced pono plants.

There are two resources available to us in the islands to help us make better decisions when buying or propagating plants. Both have been created out of a collaboration between university botanists, invasive species committees and green industries (nurseries, growers).

The first resource is the “Plant Pono Program” (www.plantpono.org).

The purpose of “Plant Pono” is to help caring but uninformed consumers find the best, safest plants for their gardens by 1) assessing and scoring many available plants by their “pono” characteristics, and 2) providing a list of nurseries and growers who commit to providing plants to their customers that have a low risk of becoming invasive.

Determining whether a plant is a low risk “Pono Plant”

The Plant Pono website provides a very useful tool for discovering a particular plant's risk of being or becoming invasive. A plant's score is created based on an evaluation of its characteristics, measured against 49 tested criteria that determine a plant's risk designation (“low-risk”, “high-risk”, and occasionally “evaluate”).

The website's “Find a Pono Plant” search tool allows us to search for a low-risk plant by its common or botanical name, or for all plants with a set of characteristics (growth form, elevation, sun tolerance... even color!). In another area on the site (“Don't Plant These”), a searchable list shows all the high-risk plants that we should AVOID planting.

Chuck Chimera is the Hawai'i state Weed Risk Assessment Specialist. He lives with his family in Honoka'a and is instrumental in providing the guidance needed to distinguish a “pono” plant from an invasive. “My job is to assess the characteristics of non-native plants and score and rate them for their risk of invasiveness in the islands,” he says. Using his training as a botanist and employing the internationally recognized Hawaii/Pacific Weed Risk Assessment process (HPWRA), Chuck has reviewed hundreds of non-native plants arriving on our shores, found in our gardens, or already escaped into our wild lands, and scored them for their risk of becoming destructive in Hawai'i.

You'll find the results of Chuck's assessment on the Plant Pono website, applied to each plant that we might encounter in nurseries or in the wild. The detailed HPWRA portrait of a

plant's characteristics can be downloaded from the site, giving us the ability to gauge a plant's habit under the unique conditions of our own gardens.

Of course, native plants are the best choice for our gardens since they are already adapted to our environment and to the other native species here. Introduced plants present the critical problems we face now, and it's our kuleana to learn how these plants might behave in our gardens and to make good choices in our plantings.



Credit: Forest & Kim Starr

A plant to avoid:
Antigonon leptopus (Coral Vine)



Credit: Forest & Kim Starr

A plant to choose instead:
Ipomoea horsfalliae (Kuhio Vine)

Among vines with showy flowers, here is a plant to avoid and a plant to choose instead..

Two examples of introduced plants and their assessments:

A plant to avoid: Take a look on the website's "Don't Plant These" list at "*Antigonon leptopus*" (*Mexican Creeper, Coral Vine*). Imagine how enticing this vine might appear to an uninformed customer in an unprincipled nursery. With a high risk assessment of **19**, this deceptively pretty vine is a serious menace in Hawai'i.

I happen to be familiar with this vine from my experience with Baja California plants, where it is called "San Miguelito". In the desert environment, it is controlled by harsh conditions, lack of rain and poor nutrients. But even there, after a rain, the vine clammers over everything, even the tallest cactus in the world, the Cardon. In Hawai'i, it easily invades forests and wild lands, smothering other plants, taking up nutrients and creating fuel for wildfires.

Here's a plant to feel confident about: While you're looking at "Antigonon leptopus" and its negative summary, notice that there are three suggested alternative plants with low risk assessment scores that you might choose to plant instead. Consider "**Ipomoea horsfalliae**" (**Kuhio Vine**), an introduced plant with a well-behaved habit and a nice, friendly score of **1**.

Prince Kuhio encountered this vine on his world travels and brought the plant back to Hawai'i. Your choice of this pretty pink climber rather than the Coral Vine could save you, your neighborhood, and our 'aina from contending with an uncontrollable invasive.

The second resource in finding your Pono Plant – look for an endorsed nursery or grower!

Molly Murphy, the Invasive Plant Prevention Specialist at the Big Island Invasive Species Committee (<https://www.biisc.org>), is responsible for the Plant Pono website and its content, among other helpful activities. "I help residents and businesses choose non-invasive plants," she told me. She keeps the website up to date and offers public talks, webinars, and other outreach activities to inform us about avoiding the purchase and

propagation of high-risk invasive plants.

Molly also reaches out to the owners of plant-oriented businesses (nurseries and growers) to encourage them to avoid selling plants with a high risk assessment of becoming invasive. A nursery or grower receives a Plant Pono endorsement when they make a commitment to avoid the sale of the worst invasive plants, to assess new plants using the HPWRA tool before offering them for sale, and to engage in practices on their properties to reduce the spread of other invasive, noxious species (little fire ants, for example).

In partnership with BIISC, the Plant Pono Program maintains a current and frequently updated list of nurseries and growers who participate voluntarily in the program. You'll find a list of endorsed green businesses on the PlantPono.org website (under "Pono Businesses").

Elemental Plants in Honoka'a – a wonderful example of a Plant Pono Endorsed Business.

Michael Gibson has been growing and selling native and other non-invasive plants on the Big Island for many years. His well-stocked and carefully managed nursery is located on the grounds of the Hamakua Harvest Market and Agricultural Center in Honoka'a.

Michael developed the concept for the Center (hamakuaharvest.org) and has participated in its formation over recent years. You'll find him at the nursery on Thursdays 10-4, and Sundays 9-2, and on his frequently updated Facebook page under "Elemental Plants".

Michael's commitment to providing plants that respect the 'aina and its fragile inhabitants motivated him long before he received the endorsement of the Plant Pono program. Describing what he gets from providing native and non-invasive plants, Michael says, "What's there not to like? It's the best of both worlds, the growing demand for perfectly adaptable, self-selected, uniquely attractive variations of color, scent and form."

The endorsement was a natural fit for Michael, giving his customers another level of assurance that their choices won't have devastating consequences in their gardens and beyond. Describing his visits to Elemental Plants, Chuck Chimera said, "I'm like a kid in a candy shop."

So, what would we want you to take away from this article and the Plant Pono program?

- Educate yourself and be aware of what you are choosing to add to your garden. Plant Pono is there to help you.
- Make use of the Plant Assessment tool on the PlantPono.org website as you consider plants.
- Consult the list on the website of Plant Pono-endorsed nurseries and growers as you search for a source for your plants.
- As always, practice your own methods (see biisc.org on LFAs) that reduce the spread of invasive pests as you bring plants and planting materials into your garden or transport them to others.

What we do in our gardens has an impact on our entire island environment. With every plant we purchase, propagate, or give to a friend, we can choose to make that impact positive for ourselves and for the 'aina we share. Choose your plants wisely and with aloha.

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## ***Coming PMKCA Meetings & Events***

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PMKCA Board of Directors Meeting

October 13, 2022, 7PM

**Location: Denning Powell's home
44-3320 Kula Kahiko Rd.**

If you would like to attend, contact a Board member for details. Members can also direct questions or concerns to any Board member for discussion at the meeting.

Oh, and by the way,

Join PMKCA or Renew Your 2022 Membership!!

Mahalo to those of you who renewed your membership at the picnic meeting! If you missed that chance, dues are only \$20 per calendar year and help support so many great community activities.

Click the "Visit our website" link below and choose Membership/Dues. We offer a PayPal option, or mail a check made out to PMKCA, PO Box 408, Pa'auilo, HI 96776. Easy-peasy - and important!

Visit our website



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