

KUKUI

Latin: *Aleurites moluccanus*

English: Kukui Nut Tree

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE:

Kukui represents enlightenment, protection, and peace in Hawaiian culture. The tree's name, kukui, means light or enlightenment, making it a symbol of knowledge. Kukui nuts are historically used as torches - when cracked open and strung on a stick, they burn one by one, acting as a natural candle. Fishermen chew on kukui nuts and spit the oil onto the ocean surface to reduce glare and improve underwater visibility. Kukui nut leis are often given to those who are seeking guidance, facing challenges, or in need of spiritual light.

TRADITIONAL MEDICINAL USES:

Raw kukui nuts are traditionally eaten in small amounts as a natural laxative. The sap (pelee) from freshly harvested kukui fruit is applied to treat cold sores, strep throat, and thrush (buildup of bacteria on the tongue). Some families use kukui sap to reset the taste buds of picky eaters. Kukui oil is applied to treat burns, wounds, and dry skin.

Kukui trees thrive in coastal areas, valleys, and lowland forests. They prefer well-drained, fertile soil, but can also grow in sandy and volcanic soils. They prefer warm, humid environments and can tolerate drought conditions once mature. Kukui was one of many plants brought to Hawaii by Polynesian voyagers in canoes.

DESCRIPTION

The kukui nut tree (*Aleurites moluccanus*), also known as the candlenut tree, is the state tree of Hawaii. It is a fast-growing tree that can reach heights of up to 80 feet, with light green leaves that some say resemble a pig's footprint or a star. Kukui is highly valued for its oil-rich nuts, which are used for food, medicine, lighting, and even fishing techniques.

FORAGING

Kukui trees grow abundantly in valleys, forests, and near riverbanks. You will often find kukui growing in conjunction with other important Hawaiian plants such as koa and 'ōhi'a lehua. There is no wrong time to harvest, but the best nuts are those that have fallen to the ground and begun to dry. They may be collected once they have shed their fruit layer and feel firm, with a slightly browned appearance.

PRESERVATION

Kukui nuts should be air-dried to prevent spoilage. One may also roast and press the nuts to extract oil, which is then stored in sealed bottles. Roasted kukui nuts can be ground into inamona, a Hawaiian condiment, which may be stored in airtight containers.



NUTRITION

Kukui nuts are rich in healthy fats, particularly omega-3 fatty acids. They provide calories, protein, and essential minerals but must be roasted before consumption due to their natural laxative properties.

COOKING TECHNIQUES

- **Inamona (Roasted Kukui Nut Paste):** The nuts are collected after they have naturally fallen, allowing the oil content to concentrate. They are then roasted and ground into a paste and used as a delicacy similar to macadamia nuts.
- **Oil Extraction:** Roasted kukui nuts can be pressed to extract a flavorful cooking oil.