

Kō (Sugarcane) as a Traditional Hawaiian Crop

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Keauhou stalk

When we think about Hawaiian crops and farming, kalo may come to mind; or maybe 'ulu, 'uala, or mai'a. Even lesser crops like niu, noni, or pia are well-known, but more often than not kō, or sugarcane, is rarely acknowledged. Perhaps it's because of the strong association with the plantation, or because sugarcane is still one of the top global agricultural crops. Whatever the reason for its omission, kō deserves a prominent place among traditional Hawaiian horticulture. The hardy grass was grown in virtually every farming landscape of Hawai'i – along the banks of lo'i kalo, blanketing the kuaiwi field walls in the dryland māla, in heavily composted pits of pāhoehoe lava flows, and, famously, even in the dry sand dunes of Ni'ihau.



From right to left: Laukona, Ualalehu, Ula, and Uluhui varieties

Long before Europeans arrived Hawaiians grew a remarkable amount of cane. While the sweet snack was eaten and harvested for a number of purposes, in some cases kō appears to have been an integral part of the cropping system. In Kohala, where the tradewinds are fiercely channeled between Hawai'i and Maui, long rows of sugarcane played an important role as a windbreak and mist trap to aid in planting 'uala. In Kona, mulch from sugarcane leaves was used to manage evaporation and, likely, nutrients to help grow bigger, healthier kalo. Kō also may have helped reduce wind erosion along the dry lowland plains of Kalaupapa, and certainly was used to reduce water erosion of 'auwai in wetland valleys such as Halawa. Research and experience indicates that sugarcane was an essential aspect to Hawaiian cropping systems.

The importance of sugarcane in Hawai'i can be seen in the high number of varieties that were developed, named, and cultivated on the islands. The development of multiple varieties can be expected for staple crops – such as kalo, 'uala, and mai'a – that were essential to the diet of Hawaiians. However, the number of native kō varieties rivals that of mai'a and 'uala, with some 80 unique names representing at least 40 different varieties. Dr. Noa Kekuewa Lincoln of UH CTAHR has worked to create an identification guide to these heirloom cane varieties. While the book is under review by UH Press, an online guide is currently being developed that the public can use to identify and learn about the traditional cane varieties. The website will include detailed pictures, traditional stories, and uses of each cane variety, as well as a botanical key that can be used to identify unknown heirloom varieties. To receive notification of the website launch, which is anticipated to occur in November of 2016, please email Noa at: nlincoln@hawaii.edu.

All photos credited to Dr. Noa Kekuewa Lincoln.



From right to left: Mahaiula, Manulele, Moano, and Pakaweli varieties