



The awa renaissance

The state awards a \$70K specialty crop grant to the nonprofit Malama Sanctuary

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Imagine if the farms and backyards of Hawaii once again flourished with awa plants — and if the beverage made from their roots were accessible pretty much everywhere in the state. That’s how Edward Johnston, one of the founders of the nonprofit Association for Hawaiian Awa, envisions it after having spent decades cultivating and advocating for the plant’s benefits. It would be a renaissance of sorts, he said, of the medicinal plant that has been part of Hawaii culture for centuries and a boost for the state’s agricultural industry.

The replanting of awa — a canoe plant named *Piper methysticum* and known elsewhere as kava — would make the beverage more accessible to residents and, at the same time, give growers in the isles a culturally relevant crop to cultivate.

The state Department of Agriculture is awarding a grant of nearly \$70,000 to Malama Sanctuary, which is partnering with AHA to improve sustainable awa production in Hawaii.

The grant specifically funds tissue culture propagation of plants, along with an education campaign via videos and social media to promote awa growing and awa’s benefits in Hawaii. The project also seeks to eliminate the need to import awa to Hawaii.

AHA is providing Hawaiian awa cultivar cuttings and plants to Malama Sanctuary for the project, with an initial batch already under development. There are 13 Hawaiian cultivars invented in the state, according to Johnston.

Johnston said the nonprofit has researched the historic use of awa through Hawaiian literature, and found it was used in ceremonies as well as in many other ways.

Based on the writings of Henry Kekahuna, Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel Kamakau, awa was a relaxing beverage at the end of a workday to get a restful night’s sleep.

“I’d like to see more families and people drinking it at the end of the day,” said Johnston, a Pepeekeo resident who grows awa in his backyard. “It’s a remarkable plant.”

Please see AWA, A14



PHOTOS COURTESY EDWARD JOHNSTON

Above, awa plants sit at Malama Sanctuary. Background photo, the papa eleele cultivar, otherwise known as awa.