

AWA

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Cultivating awa

The Malama Sanctuary, a nonprofit dedicated to creating sustainable communities, has a laboratory and greenhouses in Pahoa on Hawaii island that will house the project, according to Executive Director Alex Smolak.

“Our goal is to facilitate Hawaii becoming a global leader in awa production and to support backyard growers to plant Hawaiian awa in their home gardens,” he said.

According to Smolak, awa is a canoe plant that does not produce seeds, so the only way to reproduce it is through cuttings, which are rare, or through tissue culture propagation, which takes time.

Awa is difficult to find and is not particularly fast-growing, he said, so cannot be scaled up quickly.

In earlier times, “we had awa growing in valleys, in gulches,” said Smolak. “People came and harvested and never replanted it, so it’s very difficult now to find awa growing in the wild, uncultivated in Hawaii.”

Smolak has already been



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*Executive director,
Malama Sanctuary*

busy with tissue culture propagation — growing the plants “in vitro” — to prepare for the grant, with the goal of preserving all 13 Hawaiian cultivars.

“With tissue culture I simply take a piece of the bud, grow it in a lab in test tubes,” he said, “and from that bud it grows into thousands.”

These buds will root and become tiny plants that can then be placed in a greenhouse, and grow in about eight months into plants ideal for placement in a field.

Once established, awa is

fairly low-maintenance, with a two- to four-year harvest cycle.

The goal is to distribute the plants at affordable costs and to make them readily available. He aims to offer 1-gallon potted plants for sale statewide by the end of 2025.

“We want to promote the awa industry, but awa is also ornamental if people want to plant it,” he said. “It’s a low shrub, and some of the varieties have dark, black stems with bright green leaves.”

Clearing the way

A key to the cultivation of awa came from the state Department of Health’s clearance earlier this year of awa as “generally recognized as safe” to consume as traditionally prepared.

DOH made this determination after consultation with experts from the University of Hawaii College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources.

The department was also responding to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s determination in 2020 that kava was not safe for human consumption due to the potential for liver-related injuries.

DOH determined the key difference is in its preparation and the resulting products.

Traditionally, the awa beverage is prepared by steeping the root of the shrub in water to extract kavalactones — the compounds that work as a sedative.

When awa is mixed with acetone, ethanol or other solvents, however, the resulting product has two to 10 times more kavalactones than with water, posing a significant health hazard to the liver.

DOH said the FDA “erroneously classified” kava as unsafe for human consumption because its review of scientific studies did not look at the traditional preparation of the beverage as practiced in Hawaii.

Instead, the FDA examined studies that focused almost exclusively on kava supplements that were manufactured using acetone or other organic compounds, according to Michael Burke, DOH’s environmental health program manager.

DOH said if prepared in the “specific, traditional, and customary manner” with the noble variety of the awa root mixed with water or coconut water, the state would not consider the awa to be a violation of the law.

Due to sedative properties that help induce relaxation and sleep, awa is used

to reduce anxiety or insomnia.

Studies have found promising results on kava and its anti-inflammatory and anti-cancer effects, in addition to neurological benefits.

The state Department of Agriculture received \$525,000 in federal funding for specialty crop grants, which will be used to fund nine projects, including the awa project.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines specialty crops as fruits and vegetables that are cultivated or managed, and used by people for food, medicinal purposes or aesthetic gratification.

“Hawaii agriculture is uniquely different from the mainland in that specialty crops comprise the majority of our agricultural industry,” said Sharon Hurd, BOA chair, in a news release. “This block grant program is an important source of funding in support of both food and horticultural production in the state.”

Other projects funded by the grants include research on improving coffee plant varieties resistant to coffee leaf rust, improving sweet corn production through sustainable practices, and a specialized course to boost future seed growers in Hawaii.