

## The Ōhi'a Lehua Epidemic

According to Hawaiian legend, there once lived two lovers: a handsome man named Ōhi'a and his beautiful maiden called Lehua. The couple lived happily for years, until Pele turned Ōhi'a into a twisted tree due to her jealousy. This caused Lehua to beg other gods for help, which resulted in her transformation into the red lehua blossoms we see on the trees today. Legend has it that if one plucks a flower from the ōhi'a lehua, the sky will cry on the same day, seeing that the two lovers were separated once again. Unfortunately, a recent epidemic of rapid ōhi'a death (ROD) has already killed thousands of ōhi'a lehua trees across Hawaii island. Since the extinction of this native plant will not only be catastrophic for the fragile ecosystem of the local forests but for Hawaiian culture and history as well, we as citizens of Hawaii must take action by repopulating Hawaii with ōhi'a lehua trees and educating the general public to prevent the death of one of the most culturally rich plants native to our local ecosystem.

I was in the third grade when I first heard this story while on a field trip. Me, being the plucky eight-year-old that I was, thought that the legend was a load of garbage, so I decided to pick one of the red blossoms from a nearby ōhi'a lehua tree while on a hike. Two hours later (to my surprise), the once clear skies were now littered with grey clouds, and my entire class was soaked. This story is one that I remember to this day, so when I recently learned of the rapid death of ōhi'a trees—an epidemic on the Hawaii Island—I was devastated. Megan Miner claims in an article that on Hawaii Island, hundreds of thousands of ōhi'a lehua trees have already been killed by the fungus *Ceratocystis fimbriata* (Hawaii Magazine). Robert Schiffman of Yale University reports that the fungus is fast-acting and kills even the healthiest of trees in just a few days by clogging the vascular system of the trees, making them wilt and die as if from a drought

(Yale Environment 360). The ōhi'a lehua trees are sacred, as the famous legend attests to, and native to the Hawaiian Islands. Additionally, the blossoms are important to the fragile ecosystem of the Hawaiian forests, providing food for many native birds. The trees carry such rich history and culture that to have them go extinct would be tragic for both the environment as well as for the local population. If something is not done about this problem, there is a chance that the trees could become extinct, thus losing an important piece of Hawaiian culture and causing the collapse of ecosystems in places which the trees were once abundant.

The solution to this problem is to replenish Hawaiian forests. Yes, it is important for us to continue taking precautions advertised on the University of Hawaii website, such as prohibiting transportation of ōhi'a trees from island to island, killing infected trees, and avoid injuring healthy ones to help stop the spread of disease (College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources University of Hawaii at Manoa). However, we must also make an effort to replace the already-dead trees. I propose that farmers and even families could adopt healthy ōhi'a saplings and raise them until they are old enough to be re-planted in the wild. Also, there could be groups that educate the general public about the issue and spread awareness. These groups could advertise the idea of adopting saplings as well as teach possible do's and don'ts to hikers visiting lava fields and forests to help ensure the disease's containment by creating and handing out informational pamphlets and being open to questions about the issue. Additionally, people should be required to watch an informational video about the issue upon entering places such as Volcanoes National Park where ōhi'a lehua trees are found in abundance. Volunteers could work to create the video as well as team up with parks and possibly even the local news so that videos and articles containing information about the epidemic can be shared to an even larger audience.

By taking these precautions, the people of Hawaii could curtail the spread of disease as well as help repopulate the forests and lava fields with the red blossoms once more.

Clarence T.C. Ching was a man who had a great love for Hawaii, its people, and its culture. His donation to Chinatown's Cultural Plaza proves that he valued the history of his own roots as well the enrichment of the community. The ōhi'a lehua trees are an important part to Hawaiian history and culture, seeing that they were and still are fundamental to the Hawaiian Merrie Monarch festival as well as a trademark sight to Volcanoes National Park.

Repopulating our local forests will help preserve an important piece of Hawaiian culture, similarly to how Mr. Ching continues to do so through his foundation with their donations. If we as a community can work together to resolve this issue, then hopefully others, whether they be tourists, locals, or even plucky eight-year-olds, can see the healthy red Ōhi'a blossoms flourishing once more.

## Works Cited

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