

Flowers of the Fire

This column celebrates what's "in season," highlighting the sometimes subtle changes in Hawai'i's natural landscape. Hawaiian seasons may not be as obvious as the mainland's snowy winters and sweltering summers, but island residents do experience atmospheric shifts—sometimes quite dramatic. Right now we're witnessing a season of active volcanism: Kilauea, a volcano on the Island of Hawai'i, is erupting with renewed vigor. As Pele, the volcano goddess, flashes her fiery smile and tosses molten earth around with passionate abandon, it's a good time to pay homage to her favorite flower: the *ōhi'a lehua*.

While some nonnative island crops are suffering from the increased vog (volcanic gas), *ōhi'a* is faring well. It's among the first pioneers to sprout from freshly cooled lava, beginning the slow process of forest building. Long before humans arrived in these islands, *ōhi'a* was critical to the evolution of Hawai'i's other endemic species. As seeds blew from island to island, birds and insects followed, adapting to diverse climates.

The *ōhi'a* fills many niches in the native Hawaiian forest, ranging from a bonsai-like bog dweller to a majestic, 100-foot-tall rain-forest giant. *Ōhi'a* canopies shelter and feed native insects and birds. Camouflaged in the blossoms, the scarlet *'apapane* and *i'iwi* dip curved beaks in for nectar. The color of *ōhi'a* flowers varies. Pele's favorite, the red *lehua*, is the most abundant. Less common is yellow, or *mamo*. There are also maroon, orange, pink, and salmon-colored varieties. *Ōhi'a kea*, the white-blossomed *ōhi'a*, is so rare, it likely only exists in myth.

As this proverb from Mary Kawena Pukui's *Ōlelo No'eau* relates, few things are as eye-catching as an *ōhi'a* tree filled with *lehua* blossoms: "*He kumu lehua muimui i ka ma'u.*" (A *lehua* tree in bloom attracts birds as an attractive person draws the attention of others.)

Before you reach out to pluck a *lehua* flower for yourself, know that Pele reportedly envelops those who carelessly pick her flowers in a disorienting mist.

—Shannon Wiamecki



Photo: Cecilia Fernández Romero