

Lyon Arboretum: A Tropical Getaway

by Aaron Dorman



Situated near Honolulu on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, the Harold L. Lyon Arboretum immerses visitors in the iconic beauty of the tropics.

ENSCONCED IN the lushness of the Harold L. Lyon Arboretum, visitors would never guess they were just a few miles away from Hawaii's bustling capital city of Honolulu or touristy Waikiki Beach. Located in the foothills of the Ko'olau mountain range, with ridges on either side, the arboretum does not have views to the ocean nor a single skyscraper in sight. But what visitors will see are some of the most exotic, unique plants on earth.

The Hawaiian Islands are known for their rich biodiversity, and the arboretum spotlights the bright colors, abundant fruits, and fanciful shapes of the endemic

landscape. Lyon's horticultural manager, Liz Huppman points out that the youngest of the Hawaiian islands is only around 400,000 years old, so the islands' original pioneer species that grew into lush jungles were carried by "wind, wings, and water" from thousands of miles away. She also notes that on Oahu, "the changes in elevation, and changes in rainfall over short distances, have allowed for a lot of varied habitats," further contributing to its great botanical diversity. A big part of the arboretum's mission is helping to protect and study indigenous species, especially those endangered by habitat destruction.

CONSERVATION MISSION

The arboretum opened to the public in 1972, but its origins go back to the early 1900s when much of its nearly 200 acres were acquired by a group of sugar cane growers. Advised by plant pathologist Harold L. Lyon, the growers used the site to evaluate tree species in an effort to address the impact deforestation of the island for agriculture was having on limited sources of fresh water. After the group completed the research in the late 1940s and no longer needed the land, Lyon envisioned it as a permanent botanical garden that could both protect and

Additional Information

Harold L. Lyon Arboretum, 3860 Manoa Road, Honolulu, HI 96822. (808) 988-0456. www.manoa.hawaii.edu/lyonarboretum.

■ Hours: Year round from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday; 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday. Closed Sunday.

■ Admission is free; however there is a suggested donation of \$5 per person.

Other nearby sites to explore:

Honolulu Botanical Gardens (five sites), www.friendsofhonolulubotanicalgardens.com.

Honolulu Zoo, Honolulu, HI. www.honolulu zoo.org.

Manoa Falls, Honolulu, HI. <https://hawaii trails.hawaii.gov/trails/#/trail/manoa-falls-trail/225>.

Wa'ahila Ridge State Recreation Area, Honolulu, HI. <http://dlnr.hawaii.gov/dsp/parks/oahu/waahila-ridge-state-recreation-area>.



sections and the ethnobotanical garden, which features plants such as taro that serve important functions in Hawaiian culture. A new tropical ornamental garden is being created to showcase heliconias, gingers, and palms. There is also a children's garden near the Visitor's Center designed to engage younger visitors.

The arboretum extends beyond the cultivated gardens into the bordering forests, with marked trails leading towards Aihualama Falls. Huppman recommends stopping at Inspiration Point, a popular lookout with scenic views of the surrounding valley.

Spring and fall plant sales also attract visitors, and the arboretum offers a slate of educational programs for adults and children that highlight native Hawaiian culture whenever possible. For example, in the ethnobotanical gardens, kids can



Left: Endangered in its native Philippines, blue jade vine (*Strongylodon macrobotrys*) is a popular plant at the arboretum. Above: Kids enjoy a bug-hunt activity.

showcase Hawaii's intrinsic beauty. He facilitated its sale to the University of Hawaii for one dollar in 1953, and the university named it in honor of Lyon after his death in 1957. It served as a research station for the next two decades before opening its doors to visitors.

Today, the arboretum remains an important research facility focused on tropical species from all over the world. "Hawaii, and Lyon Arboretum, has the potential for

saving tropical rainforest species that aren't that well protected in their native lands," says Huppman. Now, the arboretum is also a destination for hikers, gardeners, and others who come to enjoy all that it offers.

TROPICAL EXPLORATIONS

The Lyon Arboretum consists of a series of gardens that wind their way around the valley and the lower slopes of the Ko'olau. The main gardens are the two Hawaiian

learn about using plants to make dyes and cloth, as well as cooking with breadfruit, taro, and sweet potatoes.

The main takeaway for visitors to Lyon Arboretum is a better sense of the vital and vibrant ecosystems Hawaii can sustain, and why they need to be protected for future generations to encounter and enjoy. 🌿

Aaron Dorman is an editorial intern for The American Gardener.