



**Tropical Treasures: Hawaii's Garden Delights & Lei Day Festivities
April 27-May 3, 2025**

Q&A with AHS Host Keith Tomlinson

Hawaii's native flora is diverse and highly endemic. What are some of the most remarkable or unusual plants that AHS travelers can expect to see, and why are they significant?

Nearly 92% of Hawaii's native plants are endemic, found nowhere else on Earth. They are sometimes exceptionally rare and difficult to see in the wild. However, our trip to the National Tropical Botanical Garden on Kauai will provide the opportunity to see numerous native species. Among these are the Hawaiian Lobelias. Relative giants compared to our beloved garden varieties, these are some of the most unique plants in the world. We are likely to see some of the native palm trees and perhaps the endemic *Brighamia insignis*, a remote cliff dweller and one of the most unique Primulas on Earth. NTBG is the premier conservation garden in Hawaii and their collections reflect that mission. The garden also exhibits many plants of particular significance to Hawaiian culture and ethnobotany.

Volcanic activity plays a key role in the soil composition across the Hawaiian Islands. How does volcanic soil influence plant growth and the types of species that thrive in different regions, and what can travelers on this itinerary expect to see in this regard, in terms of plant diversity and ecological impacts?

Indeed, Hawaii is the world's most active oceanic hot spot. The spot is largely stationary while the Earth's crust migrates slowly over it. Thus, we see the long arching archipelago with the oldest islands in the west and youngest to the east. Soils are typical of a volcanic setting; sharp drainage through porous rock topped by rich organic soil horizons evolved over millennia makes for ideal growing conditions. This benefits both native ecosystems and ornamental display gardens throughout the islands. Alternatively, some coastal locations harbor much thinner soils and are subject to more direct sunlight, resulting in coastal deserts, a surprise to many visitors. These areas are floristically highly unique and widely impacted by human activity.

With your extensive experience traveling to botanical gardens in 45 countries around the world, can you share a specific example of how a garden you visited abroad influenced or inspired a change in your approach to garden management or design?

I certainly have a few favorites! Kirstenbosch in South Africa, Nezahat in Istanbul, Kew in England and Lyon Arboretum in Hawaii among them. I always look for the message of conserving plant diversity in garden collections. The most advanced gardens will embody conservation and aesthetics effectively across collections, exhibits and education programs. This, in addition to engaging ornamental horticulture exhibits, makes for an exceptional garden. In North America, the Missouri Botanical Garden

surely ranks at the top in the conservation-aesthetic continuum. In Europe, the delightful Palmengarten in Frankfurt plays a similarly large role.

During your time as Vice President of the Hawaiian Botanical Society, what were some of the most significant initiatives you worked on?

I managed our fascinating speaker programs. All our meetings were held on the beautiful University of Hawaii campus, replete with hundreds of specimen trees. We featured speakers from around the world and many with expertise in Pacific biogeography. All botanical subjects were welcome. Predictably we also promoted many initiatives unique to Hawaii. One of my favorites was the discussion to formalize an Ethnobotany program at the University. Today there's a full degree program focused not only on Hawaii's rich ethnobotanic heritage but the greater Pacific Basin, too.

During your time at the Bishop Museum, you worked extensively with introduced tropical species and native Hawaiian flora. What are some key takeaways from your work in these areas that would be helpful for AHS Hawaii program participants to have in mind?

The Bishop campus is landscaped with both native and introduced species. It's an excellent learning space surrounding the largest Pacific Basin museum collections in the world. As a result, it's a great place to reflect on the extraordinary richness of ornamental plants in Hawaii while balancing the need to conserve the archipelago's largely endemic and endangered flora. Hawaii is unique and particularly exciting from a horticultural perspective, perhaps more so than any place I've been. As we will see, the entire island chain is endowed with intriguing horticultural and botanical wonders.

What aspect of the Hawaiian environment—whether it be its plant life, ecosystems, or cultural practices—do you find most inspiring, and how has this inspiration informed your work in botany, conservation, and garden management?

There's an innate excitement about Hawaii as a horticultural destination. It's a sensory and visual adventure steeped in historical drama. Plumerias scent the air and clouds mingle on precipitously steep green summits in the distance. The arrival of the first Polynesian some 1,200 years ago tells a story unique in all human endeavor. The later arrival of European explorers offers an insight into cross cultural contact—profound, enduring, sometimes controversial, and evolving to this day.

Within all this environmental and cultural dynamism there is a meeting of aesthetics, history, horticulture, and ecology unique in the world, embodied by a near-perfect climate so accommodating it actually warrants the moniker "paradise".

Hawaii was a profound influence on me as a museum educator, global traveler and public garden professional. I learned to love ornamental plants while carefully working to promote the state's native flora, always seeking that often delicate balance between aesthetics and ecology. Looking back over decades of work in public horticulture and plant diversity conservation, Hawaii remains a lasting inspiration and seminal place in my work as a naturalist, educator, and tour leader. In the realm of botanical and ornamental horticulture, Hawaii is an unparalleled destination for the garden enthusiast.