

GARDEN DESTINATIONS

Tropical Wonders on Oahu and the Big Island

by Josh McCullough



A pond surrounded by lush vegetation at Hawaii Tropical Botanical Garden

Sandy beaches, palm fronds set against a vibrant sunset, rainbows and yes, botanical gardens. Welcome to the Aloha State! No matter which of the main Hawaiian islands you visit, there will be a nearby garden to delight. Since there are six main islands, each requiring a trip back to the airport to reach, you'll have to be selective. Because most arriving flights land in Honolulu, on the island of Oahu, I'm going to begin our tour there with a drive to the North Shore. After that we'll go further afield by visiting two of my favorite gardens on my home island, the Big Island of Hawaii.

OHAU: WAIMEA VALLEY BOTANICAL GARDEN

Take a trip from the city of Honolulu via the majestic tunnels of Highway 3 through the Ko'olau mountains and down to the windward side to **Waimea Valley Botanical Garden** (waimeavalley.net/botanical-collection), nestled on a turnoff of the North Shore's Kamehameha highway along legendary surf beaches. This 1,875-acre preserve captivates with its diverse collection of over 5,000 plant species, showcasing the unique flora that thrives in Hawaii's tropical climate. Situated in the Waimea Valley, the garden's origins trace back centuries as

a place of significance and reverence for Hawaiian culture. Its extensive collection of native Hawaiian plants is renowned.

In addition to its botanical treasures, **Waimea Valley** (waimeavalley.net) offers many options for those seeking to connect with Hawaii's natural and cultural heritage through hula performances, luaus, and other activities.

If you're staying on Oahu, I also recommend visiting **Foster Botanical Garden** and **Harold L. Lyon Arboretum**, and a personal favorite, **Koko Crater Botanical Garden**, on the southeastern tip of the island, located on the cone of an extinct volcano.

THE BIG ISLAND: HAWAII TROPICAL BOTANICAL GARDEN

After arriving at either of the two main Island of Hawaii airports, you'll realize how the "Big Island" got its name—it has nearly twice the area of all the other islands combined! Whether you stay on the sunny Kona coast on the west or the wetter, green Hilo side on the east, you'll want to consider relaxing on beaches such as **Hāpuna**, stargazing from the summit of **Mauna Kea**, and certainly to experience the spectacular **Volcanoes National Park** (nps.gov/havo) with its active crater, lava tubes, and tree fern forests. Afterwards, head to **Hawaii Tropical Botanical Garden** (htbg.com), nestled in the lush foliage, twisting curves, and waterfalls of the old highway just north of Hilo.

This enchanting botanical haven encompasses 40 acres situated within a verdant valley and surrounded by ocean vistas and includes a stunning collection of palms, heliconias, gingers, and orchids. Visitors can marvel at cascading waterfalls, gentle streams, and panoramic views of **Onomea Bay**. Whether exploring the garden's iconic coastline, marveling at cannonball trees (*Couroupita guianensis*)—yes, the large fruits resemble cannon-



Hawaii's tropical climate supports plants such as, left to right, the native kokio ke'oke'o (*Hibiscus waimeae*), cannonball tree (*Couroupita guianensis*) from Central and South America, and jade vine (*Strongylodon macrobotrys*) from the Philippines.

balls—or taking in an overstory draped in red jade vine (*Mucuna bennettii*), a visit to the Hawaii Tropical Botanical Garden promises an unforgettable experience.

THE BIG ISLAND: HAMAKUA CHOCOLATE

Not far from Hilo is **Hamakua Choc-**

olate Farm (hamakuachocolate.com), a must-visit. Created by renowned former Pacific Northwest gardeners Dan Corson and Berndt Stugger, it was originally envisioned as their own tropical botanical garden. Nearly 20 years later, it is a masterpiece of plant combinations and eye-popping color. When the

couple discovered the land's suitability for chocolate cultivation—Hawaii is the only state in the U.S. where the chocolate tree (*Theobroma cacao*) can grow outdoors and bear fruit—a cacao orchard was added to produce artisanal chocolate. Schedule a guided tour of the farm and its cacao processing facilities—about a 3-hour experience—and partake in chocolate tastings. After the cacao experience, walk through the gardens and admire the ever-growing botanic collection, a stream and a towering suspension bridge treehouse, and various fruit and spice trees.

If you have any time left, explore Hilo. It's a campus town, being home to a branch of the University of Hawaii (UT). Visit its **'Imiloa Astronomy Center** to learn about both astronomy and its connection to Hawaiian culture. (imiloahawaii.org). Afterward, be sure to stroll through the **UT-Hilo Botanical Gardens** (hilo.hawaii.edu/gardens), where you'll be dazzled by exquisite displays of bromeliads, cycads, palms, and other tropical species from around the world. Then start planning your next trip back to Hawaii! ■



Left: Eucalyptus trees display their colorful bark in the gardens at Hamakua Chocolate Farm. Right: Harvesting cacao pods in the orchard.

Josh McCullough is a photographer who makes his home in Hawaii on the Big Island of Hawaii.