



# **Medicine at Your Feet:** **Healing Plants of the** **Hawaiian Kingdom**

**Introduction & Plant Gathering Protocols**  
**A PDF file**

**David Bruce Leonard, L.Ac.**

# **Medicine at your Feet: Healing Plants of the Hawaiian Kingdom**

## **Introduction to Hawaiian Plant Medicine & Plant Gathering Protocols**

**By David Bruce Leonard, L.Ac.**

*"A weed is a plant whose virtues have not been discovered"*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Just what you need... another  
Roast Duck Production



*"A peasant must stand a long time on a hillside with his  
mouth open before a roast duck flies in."*

- - Chinese proverb

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Dear Reader,

E kala mai, please do not pirate (copy or give away) this PDF file. It has taken eight years to research and write the book from which this material is taken. Your purchase allows us to continue research on the healing properties of medicinal plants and the restoration of our native Hawaiian ecosystems. Ten percent of the profits from this work are given to Hawaiian cultural and environmental restoration groups.

Thank you for your kind support of this work and our 'Āina. Aloha no kākou.

Mahalo,

David Bruce Leonard

## **WARNING**

**Caution: Many plants used as medicine are poisonous! They can kill you. Never attempt to use herbal medicine without the guidance of a traditional elder or a licensed healthcare provider. If you wish to act on some of the information in this book, you must consult with a professional. Do not try to be your own doctor.**

**Excerpts from**  
**Medicine at your Feet: Healing Plants of the Hawaiian Kingdom, Volume One**  
**by David Bruce Leonard, L.Ac.**

**INTRODUCTION**

*"The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in time of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality."*  
- - Dante Alighieri, poet (1265-1321)

The Hawaiian Islands are the most isolated place on earth, a string of jewels over the heart of the Pacific Ocean. More than 2000 miles from any significant landmass, the isolation of the Hawaiian Islands places them at the center of one of the most spectacular biological symphonies in global history.

The islands we know as our Hawaiian Islands are actually the eastern-most peaks of an underwater mountain range that stretches for 1200 nautical miles from the Big Island in the east, to Kure Atoll in the west. This is the largest mountain range in the world, less than 10% of which peers above the surface of the ocean. The 100 or so older islands and atolls to the west are sometimes called the "Kupuna Islands" or Ancestor Islands.

The Hawaiian archipelago is a vast time capsule stretching back millions of years from east to west. Like an immense conveyor belt, the Pacific plate slides six inches per year over a magma chamber that lies 40 miles deep in the earth. This chamber is called a "hot spot" and as each island is formed it slides over and makes room for the next. All the islands in the Hawaiian chain have arisen from this single hot spot.

Because of our isolation, Hawai'i is quite likely the best place in the world to study evolution. Charles Darwin offered a reward for any collector who would gather him plant and animal samples in Hawai'i.

Hawai'i has the highest rate of "endemism" in the world. A species is endemic to the place in which it evolved. 90% of our native Hawaiian plants and 99% of our native Hawaiian land animals evolved here and exist only in Hawai'i.

Historically, 75% of all U.S. extinctions are native Hawaiian plants and animals. Almost half of the species currently on the U.S. Endangered Species list are native Hawaiian. Half of our native Hawaiian birds are extinct. Half of those left alive are endangered. 30% of the fish in our Hawaiian coral reefs exist nowhere else on earth.

When these species are gone, they are gone forever.

The Hawaiian archipelago is over 70 million years old. Hawai'i became home to one new species every 50,000 years. This gave each new species plenty of time to naturalize and evolve, to turn into a multitude of other

different species. This unprecedented explosion of biodiversity is called 'adaptive radiation'. The Hawaiian biosphere could well be the crown jewel of biological creation on planet Earth.

It has been said that when the first Polynesians arrived from the Marqueses to Hawai'i, each valley had it's own species of spider and each ridge had it's own species of snail, each descended from a few common ancestors.

We are now introducing new species into Hawai'i at the rate of 20-30 per year. This is 2 million times faster than the natural rate. The impact of humans on Hawai'i nei is systematically destroying our biodiversity. Hawai'i has become the extinction capital of the world. We now have 500,000 feral cats on Maui alone, not to mention hoofed weed-whackers like goats and pigs. We have highly aggressive bees, coqui frogs, stinging ants, and psychopathic seaweeds, all brought here by *Homo sapiens*. This does not *have* to happen. We are simply unwilling to make the hard choices that are necessary to protect our home.

The current unprecedented destruction of native Hawaiian ecosystems must be factored in to any decision regarding Hawai'i, including the gathering of herbal medicines. Given the rare nature of many Hawaiian plants, I've purposely excluded certain endangered native plants I consider to be "at risk" for abuse.

There is a Hawai'i that exists beyond the coconut palms, umbrella drinks, and basted pink flesh. It is a place beautiful beyond description. To view a forest only as a "resource" is to never see the forest at all. How many dollars is a Palila (a native Hawaiian bird) worth? What is the value of a ten million year old ecosystem? The question is so transparent that we don't even see what it says about *us*.

**Na Wao Akua (Hawaiian forests), Na'au (Knowledge),  
a me Na'auao (Illuminated Mind)**

*Your gods, your ghosts,  
your demons & dreams bear witness  
as you pull rich gifts from your darkness*

*May they return...  
to hunt you,  
to haunt you,  
to heal you.*

*This darkness is my gift to you,  
an anchor through time in the bones of your ancestors.  
This darkness is my gift to you,  
a rich compost to take root in.  
This darkness is my gift to you,  
a place in the earth... an anchor through time.*

The forest in old Hawai'i was known as "Wao Akua" or "Lands of the Gods." The Wao Akua was a place untouched by the hand of man, a place where God could be experienced directly.

The best way to enter and move through the Wao Akua is to bring the focus or awareness into the "Na'au" (the area of the lower abdomen). This area is important in many traditional medicines. It is known as the "Dan Tien" in traditional Chinese medicine and the "Hara" in traditional Japanese medicine.

Na'au means literally "guts," but it also implies "knowledge" or "mind." From a Hawaiian perspective, viewing the world through our head or thinking mind can mislead us, but our na'au (intuition or gut feeling) will rarely lead us astray.

The word "Ao" means "light" or "daylight," as well as "earth" and "world." Thus, when na'au is combined with Ao it becomes "Na'auao": the Hawaiian word for "Spiritual Wisdom" or "Enlightenment." This is literally: "Illuminated Mind"

Walking in the forest while experiencing the world from the na'au adds remarkable depth to the gathering of medicine. The world is experienced through our skin and organs, not watched like television with our talking heads. The knees are bent, the center of gravity is low, the awareness is brought to the abdomen, and the attention is "focused" on the peripheral vision ("haka hele"). While gathering we feel for hō'ailona or naka (signs) that give us direction in what we are doing. This practice can take years to master but it is well worth the effort. When we gather herbs we must be willing to *listen* to the forest, not just with our ears, but also with our bodies and our intuition. Rather than telling the forest what *it* is, we let the forest tell *us* what it is. We empty

our minds and *pay attention*. Our thinking mind takes a back seat, and we learn to pray with our bodies. These plants become our teachers.

This attention is used not only in the Wao Akua, but also while working with patients. When we *pay attention*, our patients become our teachers.

The intellect, like science or technology, is a good servant but a poor master. It is not an end in itself. Like a cup that holds tea, the intellect is a vessel that can "hold" the intuition or spiritual connection. The cup without the tea is dry and unsatisfying. The tea without the cup is unfocused and is not held in a useful way. When we "study" plants the intellect is the "driver" and in control. But while gathering medicine the intellect should move out of the way and allow the body to direct the process, interrupting only when necessary. This shift in perception is a critical part of gathering plant medicines.

### **PLANT GATHERING PROTOCOLS: BRINGING THE MEDICINE HOME**

If we are to create a world suitable for human habitation, we must bring the sacred back into our medicine and into our lives. Without a genuine connection to the earth, we lose our medicine *and* the roots of our humanity.

While I am imparting one outline of a Hawaiian gathering protocol, it is only a brief description of a subject that can be quite complex. If you are interested in collecting medicines, you should receive further instruction from a teacher or Hulu Kupuna (Treasured Elder).

Experiencing herbs as live beings conveys *information* to us that is missing from our experiences with store-bought bottles of pills. Through our intent, we can become more deeply connected to the source and origins of the medicines we use. This can also help us understand their "energetics," which is the way they interact with their environment and with us. When we herbalists use local plants rather than using store-bought herbs, we are developing a different *relationship* to plants... and to the earth. This relationship is at the heart of most traditional medicines and is missing from most modern medical practices, both Asian and Western.

I regard local plants as old friends. I am familiar with the neighborhoods where they live. I know if it is rainy or dry in that area and I know what the soil is like. I know who their neighbors are, and I know if they've been troubled lately. I can tell by looking at them if they are happy or not. We always understand our friends better if we know where they live and visit them there.

Please note that while I often refer to "Wao Akua" (the forest), it is not necessary to only gather plants in a forest. Medicines can be gathered from any place that is not contaminated by pollution or bad feelings.

In traditional Hawaiian culture there were likely as many gathering rituals as there were families. I have included one that was taught to me that I sometimes use while collecting medicine for a patient. There are many others. The order and sequence of any protocol will vary depending on the family and tradition. My focus while teaching is not so much that students use a "*correct*" protocol. For example, in Hawaiian medicine we will often

use the left hand to gather for a female patient and the right hand to gather for a male. But other traditions may use a different protocol, and that is fine. I am more concerned that the student's approach is at least earth-centered. I believe that any protocol that is earth-sensitive will create a profound shift in our usual "feed the trash and take out the cat" mentality.

While gathering medicine we are taking lives, the lives of these plants. In order for us to live, many things must die each day. Some day we too will die and become food. It is important to remember this and honor the gifts we are given. It is also important to ask permission before we gather, sometimes days or weeks before we begin. Plants have an intelligence that we must strive to appreciate. This is where the work begins.

A specific gathering lei (garland) is sometimes worn and I often create a medicine bundle to store the herbs that have been gathered for the patient. Upon leaving the Wao Akua (the forest), the gathering lei or a woven article is sometimes left as an offering (ho'okupu). The patient, given the medicine bundle, can prepare the gathered ingredients as their medicine and the bundle itself can be replanted in their yard, where it will continue to grow. This can create a sense of healing continuity through time.

The plants, in gathering and preparation, may be consecrated with the Hā (breath) of the practitioner. As it was taught to me, I do this with breath from the nose.

Bright clothing, particularly bright yellow, is discouraged in Wao Akua, as is loud or disrespectful behavior. Traditionally medicine is gathered fresh for one person at a time, before sunrise, and while going "makai" (toward the ocean). At the very least, it is best to gather before the sun is high. When gathering for a male patient, the right hand is used to gather materials from the East side of a plant, and for a female patient the left hand is used to gather from the West side of a plant. Sometimes a "male" God such as Kāne, Kū, or Wākea is invoked for men, and a "female" deity such as Hina, Pele, Papa, or Laka is invoked for women. I almost always invoke Lono, regardless of the gender of the patient. Some Hawaiian practitioners gather with a specific knee bent for a male or female patient. Certain plants (such as *Solanum americanum* or *Cordyline terminalis*) have their own specific gathering and preparation "rules." Remember that these are only a few of many possibilities and that they will vary according to the plants being gathered, situation, family traditions, etc.

Sometimes a 'kapu' space (sacred space) will be created before starting a journey through the forest. A kapu space is a place inside of us that is unaffected by the outside world. This can be done alone or collectively in a group. It is very powerful and can radically change both the experience and outcome of medicine gathering.

Omens (hō'ailona) both "positive" and "negative" are *always* acknowledged. If a gathering companion falls and stumbles repeatedly, or if there are "unexpected obstacles" to the process of gathering medicines, those involved should stop and pray or meditate together. If the disruptions continue, the gathering should be re-evaluated and done another time.

One gathering protocol I use is as follows:

### 1. *Gratitude, Meditation, and Prayer - Turning to Spirit, tuning into Spirit*

Gratitude is the only emotion that will never fail us, no matter what our circumstances. For those who are atheists or agnostics, please remember that one can turn to spirit without "praying" to a bearded white-guy-in-the-sky with a deep voice. This gratitude or meditation can be expressed to the Earth itself: to the Universal mind; or to the "Great Spirit" as it is called in the Native American tradition. What is important is not who or what we pray to, but that we pray at all. It's not the prayer, but whom we become through praying that makes the difference. *All* things in Hawaiian culture begin and end in prayer. If we don't know what to do, we pray. And if we don't know why we're praying... we pray to find out.

### 2. *Offering a gift: A mele oli (a chant), a lei, etc.*

Just as one would never visit a Kupuna (respected elder) empty handed, the same applies while visiting Wao Akua (Hawaiian forest). A gift of a chant, food, or lei is an appropriate expression of appreciation. (Whatever is left as a gift however, should be made of natural materials and should blend in reasonably well. Don't bring your childhood decoder ring or your favorite Nine Inch Nails CD as an offering).

### 3. *Permission: May I gather?*

A basic courtesy.

### 4. *Introduction: Who am I?*

Your name (or a nickname to protect you from "kolohe" or mischievous sprits) is given.

### 5. *Where am I from?*

This is a description of your ethnic background as regards your family history. This is a Polynesian custom, based on the importance of 'ohana (family) in interpersonal relations. Polynesian peoples "know" each other through family connections.

### 6. *Who am I gathering for?*

The patient you are gathering for is named.

### 7. *Why am I gathering, to what end?*

This is a statement of your intention of the desired outcome for that specific patient. "I am gathering so that Auntie Alice can breath freely and share her Aloha with the world."

### 8. *Why am I really here?*

The answer to this question might go something like this: "I am here because I didn't feel like doing my income taxes this morning and needed an excuse to get out of the house." Or, "I am here because I want my patient to think I'm a good practitioner." Or perhaps, "I am here because I *really do* love Auntie Alice and I want her to live a long life."

This is a question that is answered in the depth of our self-honesty and is typically shared only with God. The answer to this question is an acknowledgement of the shadow of our psyche and our humanness. While saying this can be embarrassing (even when said silently) it is an important form of self-honesty. We do this as a gift to

ourselves... to bring our unconscious forces into the light of the conscious mind. And, lest we get too impressed with ourselves as practitioners, it gives us humility.

#### 9. *Giving thanks. Again, Gratitude.*

So, a typical protocol may be done out loud or silently and might go something like this:

*Meditation, Prayer, or Chant.*

*Recognition of Ke Kuahiwi (the mountain), Ka 'Āina (the land), and Ke Kai (the ocean) as the source of who we are and from which we receive blessings.*

*A gift is then given to the forest.*

*May I gather plants from this forest? I am David Bruce Leonard, a student of Hawaiian medicine under Kahu Kawika Ka'alakea. I am descended from the Northern European families of Leonard, Lincoln, Rich, Heyndrickx, and DeNutte. I am here gathering for my patient XXXX so that she can heal the sores on her legs and stabilize her blood sugar. (The patient is visualized throughout this process as having healthy legs, mobility, and vitality). I am here also because I needed to get out of the house.*

*Thank you. I vow to honor, sustain, and nourish this Wao Akua as my kuleana (privilege / responsibility).*

This is a simple and adaptable protocol that can be used in numerous kinds of situations. Done often enough, these steps will soon become unconscious habits. There are other detailed protocols involving very specific plant combinations and *kinolau* (divine physical manifestations), but they are beyond the scope of this book. The subject of traditional gathering protocols can be very complex. Again if you are interested in collecting herbs, you should receive further instruction from a teacher of traditional medicine.

And remember, (as my Hawaiian teachers never tire of telling me), There is no medicine in the plants; the plants are simply a vehicle. Our medicine is our relationship to God.

## HOW PLANTS ARE ORGANIZED

All life forms are organized into categories. The most commonly used category of life is called a *species*. A number of species together forms a *genus*. A number of *genera* (the plural of genus) constitute a *family*. Families are combined to create an *order*, and so on. From a larger perspective it looks something like this:

### Division

Class

Subclass

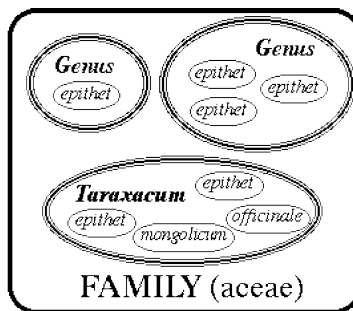
Order

Family

Genus

Species (specific epithet)

The most common designator of an individual plant is the species name, which consists of the genus *and* the specific epithet. Thus the plant name for the common dandelion is *Taraxacum officinale*. *Taraxicum* is the genus and *officinale* is the specific epithet. Together, they make up the species name: *Taraxicum officinale*. However, there is another dandelion that grows in China and is sufficiently different from *Taraxicum officinale* to be classified as a separate species. That plant is called *Taraxicum mongolicum*. Thus, *Taraxicum officinale* and *Taraxicum mongolicum* are two species within the genus *Taraxicum*. The genus *Taraxicum* is one of the many genera that make up the family Asteraceae. Family names generally end in "aceae." The system looks something like this:



Each plant and flower has a specific "look" to it. That "look" more than likely indicates that a plant is in a certain family. Each family may have common chemical constituents that involve predictable pharmacological actions on the human body. The medicinal effects of plant families are a very important field of study for herbalists, but it is also a subject of too large a scope for this book.

## **Cultural differences between Chinese and Hawaiian herbal medicine**

Chinese and Hawaiian medicines often have diametrically opposed methods of plant preparation due to the significant differences between the cultures. Because this is a cross-cultural and somewhat schizophrenic tome, that dichotomy is reflected herein.

Hawaiian medicine is seated in a tradition of using fresh plant materials, gathered for one person at a time, and usually in combinations of less-than six ingredients. Flowers and leaves are used more commonly than roots, and the materials are usually used raw or boiled for only a short period of time. Materials are often gathered from nearby one's home, or for a more serious condition, gathered by a family practitioner from Wao Akua (an upland forest).

China has been an urban culture for thousands of years, with vast numbers of people packed into very small areas. The gathering of fresh herbal medicines was impractical in such a setting, so the Chinese learned how to dry and store their plant materials for future use. Because of volatile oils and other plant constituents, roots were discovered to have a longer "shelf life" than flowers or leaves. As a result, Chinese herbal medicine has more roots in its pharmacy than does Hawaiian medicine. A typical Chinese herbal pharmacy has 300-400 different plant medicines on hand at any one time, around half of which are roots. These are gathered, prepared, and transported from across China. Herbs in a Chinese pharmacy are stored in drawers to facilitate easy access, but when dealing with this many herbs, identification can be a problem, Dried leaves often just look like dried leaves, dried roots often just look like dried roots, and the whole mess could easily be something that you just raked up out of your yard. So how can practitioners tell these herbs apart when preparing herb formulas? Being the innovators that they are, the Chinese came up with a system of dried plant identification that allows one to identify each herb almost from across the room. Each herb is cut in a specific way and to a specific length, making it instantly recognizable. This preparation is somewhat standardized across China. The result is that the prepared root *Paeonia alba* (bai shao) in Beijing will look identical to *Paeonia alba* (bak chut) in Guangzhou.