

WEED OF THE WEEK
JULY 2 2008

FEATURED SPECIES: FALSE `AWA (KAVA), *Piper auritum*

When we think about native and invasive species in Hawai'i, it is important to remember that the host culture is closely connected in history and practice with the native flora and fauna of the islands. Which means, that our native species, many of them are found nowhere else on the planet, are not only valuable because of their biological uniqueness, but also because they are linked to the preservation and continuation of the Hawaiian culture. As Kupuna Sabra Kauka said, "We cannot practice the culture without the plants."

`Awa (*Piper methysticum*) was brought as one of the canoe plants by the earliest settlers to Hawai'i. It is used medicinally, as well as for prayer and pleasure. It is shared as a sacred plant throughout Polynesia. `Awa is produced locally, here on Kaua'i, and throughout the state.

Unfortunately, in the 1990s, false `awa (*Piper auritum*) was accidentally introduced to Hawai'i, mistakenly as true `awa. People throughout the state are cultivating false `awa, thinking that they have the real thing. False `awa does not contain the biological properties that make `awa such an important culturally used plant. Instead, it behaves like a weed, growing fast and spreading, out-competing other species in the garden and forest.

You can tell false `awa apart from true `awa by...

1. **Leaves:** False `awa has larger, lighter green leaves, while genuine `awa leaves are smaller and darker green. Also, false `awa leaves have a red piko.
2. **Stem:** True `awa has swollen jointed nodes along the stem, whereas false `awa does not.

For more identification photos and info, please go to www.kauaiisc.org website, under the WOW section (on right side column).

When people unknowingly mix false `awa in with true `awa the product is diluted and the crop devalued, which then also impacts our local economy and agriculture.

KISC has worked on removing false `awa from Kahili Mountain. At local garden events, false `awa has been spotted mislabeled as true `awa. Please call us (643-PEST, 642-7378) if you think you may have false `awa, and we can help! Together, we can protect our rich and genuine `awa crop on Kaua'i!