

KAVA-KAVA— AN ETHNOBOTANICAL TREASURE

Among the many ethnobotanical treasures in The Arboretum's collections is the plant that has been central to the social and ceremonial life of the Pacific Islanders for millennia.

This plant is known under various names including kava-kava, kava, or 'awa (pronounced ava), as it is known in the Hawaiian Islands. The same name is used for the beverage prepared from the plant.

Botanically, kava is *Piper methysticum*. It is placed in the pepper family (Piperaceae) (not to be confused with chili peppers in the nightshade family) to which belongs the beloved black pepper. It is an evergreen shrub with knobby, jointed stalks which can grow eight to ten feet tall; leaves

are large and heart-shaped.

This species is known only from cultivation. It is thought to be derived from a wild piper species (*P. wichmanii*), native to northern Vanuatu, a place where researchers have identified hundreds of different selections of kava each with its own distinctive combination of appearance and particular balance of active ingredients and hence inebriating properties. Kava was likely distributed widely in early times by mariners to islands throughout Polynesia,

Melanesia, and Micronesia.

The first report by outsiders of kava's use comes from Captain Cook's voyage to the Pacific in 1768-1771.

According to Cook's account, natives chewed or pounded the root and mixed it with water to produce a thick brew, which they then consumed for its subtle psychoactive properties particularly during ceremonies where religious, political and social issues were discussed.

The root of kava contains the highest concentration of the active ingredients called kavalactones, known only from the kava plant and its purported ancestor. The preparation of kava is time-consuming and requires much effort. The roots are harvested after a minimum of 18 months of growth. Older roots are said to have stronger effects. Then follows the cleaning of the roots and extensive pounding to break up the tissues and release the active ingredients.

Common effects of the kava drink include a state of relaxation, reduced muscle tension, and feelings of peacefulness, contentment, and sociability. While the body may feel very relaxed, mental alertness is not affected.

As a medicinal plant, kava has therapeutic value for anxiety and stress,

menopausal symptoms, urinary tract infections, muscle aches and spasms, gastrointestinal disorders, chronic fatigue syndrome, as an anti-seizure medicine, painkiller, blood-thinner, and as an anti-inflammatory agent.

In the past year there have been several reports of individuals in Europe or the US with liver damage after consuming kava on a regular basis. However, there are many people in the Pacific islands who have consumed kava on a daily basis for almost a lifetime with no apparent liver damage. To be safe, people with liver problems should probably not take kava. Additionally, one should not drive after indulging in kava, and kava and alcohol do not mix.

At The Arboretum, three types of kava are established in the nursery greenhouses. Plans call for putting kava on display in the public Tropical Display Greenhouse, as well as in the Herb Garden.

*Contributed by
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Senior Biologist*



Kava-Kava from The Arboretum greenhouse collection.

ETHNOBOTANICAL LECTURE SERIES

"THE ETHEREAL EPIPHANY OF MAMA COCA[INE]:

ETHNOBOTANY OF ERYTHROXYLUM SPECIES"

On Wednesday, December 11, Jonathan Ott, an authority in the field of psychoactive plants and mushrooms, including shamanic inebriates,

or entheogens used for millennia by traditional societies, will speak on his research and travels in South America and the ethnobotanical history of coca. The lecture will start at 7:30 pm in Ayres Hall.

Mr. Ott is a spellbinding speaker, and the evening promises to be an entertaining and informative overview of the long and fascinating ethnobotanical history of coca.

A widely published expert in the field, Jonathan Ott has carried the

entheogenic movement a giant step forward with his scholarly masterpiece of entheogenic plant science, *Pharmactheon*. Considered a must have for those interested in entheogens, Ott introduces the word "entheogenic", which means substances which create spirit or god within us.

Tickets for each lecture are \$10 for Arboretum members, \$12.00 for non-members and \$8.00 for students with identification.



2000. "'The ethereal epiphany of mama coca[ine]: ethnobotany of erythroxylum species'." *News from the Arboretum of Los Angeles County* 2002-2003:Nov.-Jan., 3.

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