

From living collections to living relations: restoring plants and our bonds with them through biocultural conservation

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Relationships are at the heart of biocultural conservation. By restoring flourishing relationships—between people, plants, and place— we can realize thriving ecosystems and communities. Critically, this practice is guided by Indigenous knowledge systems. It attempts to address the ways conservation has historically excluded people for the perceived sake of biodiversity to the very detriment of that biodiversity. At the National Tropical Botanical Garden we work to put this biocultural ethos in action and advocate for community-based approaches. We would like to share the dimensions and success of this approach through the stories of three Hawaiian plants perpetuated by and closely connected to Limahuli Garden and Preserve: olonā (*Touchardia latifolia*), hala o Naue (*Pandanus tectorius*), and pāpala (*Charpentiera obovata*). Olonā is an endemic plant famed for producing one of the finest grades of fiber in the world. Hala o Naue, a variety with special red keys commemorated in song, was once feared lost after two destructive hurricanes. Pāpala was used for ‘ōahi ceremonies where flaming branches, hurled off mountain peaks, blew miles out to sea. All three plants and the relationships they sustain have suffered from settler colonialism and environmental degradation. Today, Lei Wann and her team are bringing olonā, hala o Naue, and pāpala back into cultivation by rekindling ancestral connections and community relationships. Her team envisions a future where weavers can once again use olonā, where our community can sing in the shade of hala o Naue, and ‘ōahi practitioners can illuminate the skies with flaming pāpala. And these stories are going viral; our communications on these plants and our biocultural efforts have reached over nine million people. Through this advocacy, our hope is that more botanic gardens reimagine their “living collections” as “living relationships,” restoring cultural balance to the plants and places that sustain us.