



Niu Nursery at the University of Hawaii West Oahu – helping to propagate healthy + diverse uluniu (coconut groves) in Hawai'i

Niu Now! Honoring our Coconut Heritage

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"To all my fellow farmer friends. Let us grow numerously. In the past, when our chiefs of our past lived, our oceans were stunning and beautiful and so was our coconut groves. It is equally our responsibility to this generation that we have been lazy and/or disheartened to our coconut. We are falling morally, as a people we are at a point of extinction of these beautiful coconut trees that glorify the kingdom of Hawaii. Coconut trees are much more beautiful than any tree foreigners are bringing in and introducing to our islands. In old age I wish to see the coconut groves to be in great numbers as they were in my youth and to see them grow strong, increase, productive and big." Lauhua (?) Kanu Niu - Coconut Planting, from Ka Nupepe Kuokoa, Volume V, Number 51, December 22, 1866 (original text in Hawaiian)

We were once a nation nourished with niu - coconuts! Famous were the uluniu, the coconut groves at Kapuaiwa of Moloka'i, Helumoa of Waikiki, Pokai Bay of Waianae, Halape of Ka'u, and Kalapana of Puna on Hawai'i moku. Beloved are the people and ali'i who planted these uluniu and nourished people with an abundance of wainiu (coconut water + milk), food, oil, and with life sustaining resources. These include launiu/leaves to weave baskets, kumu niu to fashion pahu/drums, 'ihe/spears and o'o/farming tools; pulu niu - husks for rope, with pulu niu used in farming for moisture retention and soil rejuvenation. Niu is considered *the tree of life* in most tropical regions, but here in Hawai'i, we view this regal niu palm as an ornamental liability.

How's that!? Since the overthrow of our Hawaiian Nation (1893); statehood (1959) and continued occupation, our cultural niu practices and food relationship to the coconut has eroded and been devalued and undermined. De-nuding nuts from coconut palms is a key metaphor of our own impotence and it severs our continuous link with uluniu – healthy and thriving coconut groves - throughout Hawai`inuiākea.



Enter NiU NOW! Here is a community cultural agroforestry movement emerging on O'ahu to affirm the importance of niu and coconut groves – uluniu. At the center of this movement is the re-establishment of our love and relationship with niu and the ancient knowledge practices of our coconut heritage. We recognize niu as a sacred resource and we are learning from cousins throughout the world by seeking help and guidance to find our way back to Hawaiian niu traditions that have endured within our own 'ike niu practices – kulolo, haupia, wainiu, hula niu, pahu, weaving – but need encouragement to flourish. Continuity and enduring knowledge systems are re-entering our awareness from island places such as Sāmoa, Tonga, Micronesia, Tahiti, Rotuma, Ni'ihau, and from the Southern Sri Lanka town of Matara. *Mahalo niu for allowing us to find, see, and love our cousins again.*

NiU NOW! has three priorities to re-establish the coconut back into ka pae 'āina o Hawai'i, into the Hawaiian islands: 1) Hawaiian cultural revitalization, 2) ecological conservation, and 3) food security/healing. We begin first with land-based practices that 'honor our coconut heritage.' Our movement was founded in our back yards and in the hearts and cultural practices of community. Our growth has continued over five years and has amplified with community support to reinvisage and reconstruct a living economy. Not large-scale uluniu, coconut groves, for economic gain, rather groves for a healthy society and the well-being of people.

Honoring our coconut heritage.
Ku'u 'āina aloha: cultural agroforestry is a real idea.



Hahai no ka ua i ka ululā'au. Plant a forest and the rains will come.
Create purpose with others and life will have meaning.

niunow.org

Hawaiian Cultural Revitalization: *Cocos nucifera* L. (Arecaceae), commonly called the coconut palm or **niu** within Oceania, flourish around the equatorial coconut belt. In the Hawaiian Islands, the "fruitless coconut tree" is an exotic iconic symbol of tropical islands used as a landscaping palm. The true niu momona - flourishing coconut palm- is embedded within island Indigenous cultures telling our stories of who we are within places, and as people. *Hawai'i is no exception!* This palm produces food year around while every part of it is useful. It has cared for human needs for thousands of years and provided actual visual evidence of stories found in legends and myths. The niu is a vital source of our collective and cultural emergence.

Conservation: The resilience of the niu is embodied within the coconut itself; the nut is capable of floating on saltwater for over one hundred days and for thousands of miles. It supports the livelihood and life of over one hundred million people around the world, and it holds centuries of cultural understandings not always aligned with modern botanical research. Throughout the Pacific stories of the coconut palm as the *first tree* to come and the *last tree* to stand after many natural disasters helps us re-establish a working relationship that guides us through these global changes. The niu is an untapped resource for the climate that has already *changed*.

The coconut palm is also diverse, and conservation efforts have begun to safeguard this diversity. The niu is the only living species belonging to the coco gene, but the palms are functionally unique with many different varieties and various reproductive patterns. Long ago when humanity took great interest in this legendary palm, a mutual understanding of best benefits from each variety built a symbiotic relationship, even allowing niu to be a medium to approach the spiritual world. However, the current coconut apathy has led to genetic erosion of both species and associated knowledge. Therefore, Niu NOW! has begun to document local niu varieties and we have collecting thousands of seed nuts for our niu nursery settings.



Uluniu o Kūkaniloko.



Niu Nursery @ Waianae Coast Comprehensive Health Center.



Niu diversity matters. WCCHC niu.

Our Vision – *We envision niu as a relationship rooted in community and aloha aina* - is in action today as we distribute healthy niu seedlings, without cost, allowing our community to grow and practice the 4 Ps: Pono Palm in Pono Places, thus restrengthening our kinship with this magnanimous palm. We honor and are humbled by our collaborators and fellow niunates – making themselves available for workdays, idea exchanges, weaving, weeding, watering, Zooms, mulching, planting, gathering. We are inspired by all of it.

Food Security/Healing: Coconuts are nutritionally rich and classified as *functional food* with vitamins and minerals. Coconut palms provide food in many different ways; sap is tapped from its young flowers and made into many different products including sugar, vinegar, and liquors. Coconuts are eaten in over six growing stages in hundreds of different ways unique to place and people. Throughout Polynesia, coconut oil is medicine for many illnesses. In addition, researchers have shown coconut oil aids in treating diabetes. It's time for us to rediscover the niu remedy that stands in our backyards. It's time to ask questions from ourselves: *Why are we importing coconut products when we are surrounded by niu? Why are we not more engaged in all aspects of our local coconut products?* The niu is vital for Island food security and needs to be engaged with ancient knowledge practices currently seeking expression.

Hawaiian Niu Stages

‘ōi’o	unripe nut with jelly-like translucent flesh
haohao	maturing nut with shell still white; flesh soft + white
‘ili kole	half-ripe nut, not good for extraction of cream, meat eaten raw with salt and poi
o’o	nut mature but husk not dried; ripe, consistent meat
malo’o	brown mature nut, husk dry, water still present, best stage for planting - still edible
ho’oiho	spongy pulp in sprouting nuts; choice food
ōka’a	brown, old nut with no water and meat separated from shell so as to make a rattling sound; oil is extracted at this stage

Regaining our relationship with the coconut is a metaphor for life and thus the evolution of humanity. We heal when we engage with what is before our eyes and through our own meaning-making. We awaken when we choose the natural world over simulation. Lives *change* with one sip of fresh coconut milk, and our world changes when we share it with others.

Niu NOW! Niu-nates are passionate people dedicated to the coconut. We started small and now we're growing niu nurseries in multiple locations with a collection of 50+ varieties of niu and thousands of niu seedlings. We are giving away healthy 300+ niu seedlings on Friday, November 19, 2021 to mark and honor the Makahiki Season at UH West Oahu - so come and find us! We are collaborating on many uluniu (coconut groves) with friends dedicated to food security and cultural revitalization. It has been a steep learning curve for all, but we are strengthened by practicing the 4 Ps – Pono Palm in the Pono Place. Really, do we all need to plant our niu over sidewalks and driveways? Let us regain our common sense so we can grow our own uluniu.

Did you know the coconut is *officially* labelled an ornamental tree in Hawaii? Please consider signing a petition to change the niu back into a food resource. <http://chnq.it/qQqjVQprfv>

We are in a shift here in the Hawaiian Islands. There is an urban food forest movement happening. It is embedded within a cultural agroforestry collective dedicated to bringing Hawaiian garden pedagogies into our own yards, communities and kitchens. We are working toward food sovereignty because of the insights, needs and knowing of cultural practitioners, and because of the needs of our time. We are working to bring back native stewardship of lands and fish ponds, estuaries and mountain valleys. It is time to repopulate our food selection with ancient knowing, practices and tastes found in natural spaces and organic pedagogies tied to place and people. *Ulu ka niu! Let the coconut thrive! Let our people thrive!*

For more information please see: niunow.org



Kaui Sana of MA'O Farms, Lualualei, collected 220 niu seedlings (2021). Indrajit Gunasekara teaching 'ike niu to mahi'ai.