

MAY DAY is LEI DAY in HAWAI'I

By Kumu Hula Kehau Chrisman

The celebration of “May Day is *Lei Day*” was introduced to *Hawai'i* in the early 1920s.

“In the 1920s, at a busy period of steamship travel to the Islands and the growing appearance of lei sellers lining the piers and sidewalks of downtown hotels, poet Don Blanding came up with an idea. He thought Hawaii should have a day set aside to celebrate the flower lei, and discussed this with Honolulu Star-Bulletin columnist Grace Tower Warren, who suggested it be on May Day and coined the phrase “May Day is Lei Day.” May Day was seen as the perfect day for Lei Day because many varieties of flowers would be in bloom and it'd make May Day a colorful day and occasion.”

The first official *Lei Day* celebration was held in 1928, and it has been a part of our Hawaiian culture ever since.

I think every person who grew up in *Hawai'i* has memories of their *Lei Day* program every year at school. It was every schoolgirl's dream to be designated as *Lei Day Queen* for the program, and/or to be one of the eight princesses representing each of the Hawaiian Islands. (Funny that they didn't have a king or princes!) It was from those days that we all learned as little kids what the official color of each island was, and what the official flower was. This got reinforced in our minds with every parade that we watched on *Kamehameha Day* and during *Aloha Week*. My cousins and I would have a contest during the parade to see which of us would be first to name the next island *pā'ū* horseriding unit in the procession, based on the colors the riders were wearing. (Despite my age and wisdom as the oldest cousin, the youngest one usually won because she had the better eyesight!)

The 1923 Territorial Legislature established an official color and flower or *lei* material for each island. Almost 100 years later, it is so much a part of the culture, that I insist that all of my *Hālau haumāna* know this. Here is a chart of the islands, followed by the official color, and flower or *lei* material with scientific name:

Hawai'i: red, *'ōhi'a lehua* (*Metrosideros polymorpha*)

Maui: pink, *lokelani* or pink Damask rose (*Rosa damascene*)

Moloka'i: green, *kukui* or candlenut tree (*Aleurites moluccana*)

Lana'i: orange, *kaunaoa* or native dodder (*Cuscuta sandwichiana*)

Kaho'olawe: grey, *hinahina* or native heliotrope (*Heliotropium anomalum*)

O'ahu: yellow, *'ilima* (*Sida fallax*)

Kaua'i: purple, *mokihana* (*Pelea anisata*)

Ni'ihau: white, *pūpū* or shell

The following website for Hawaiian Isles Kona Coffee Co. has beautiful pics of all of these flowers or *lei* materials. Happy *Lei* Day, Everybody! "Make a *lei*, wear a *lei*, give a *lei*."

<https://www.hawaiianisles.com/official-flowers-of-the-hawaiian-islands>