

Osage orange helps make point about invading species

Kia'i Moku

By Lissa Fox



“Good fences make good neighbors,” said poet Robert Frost, but Osage orange is one plant your neighbors won’t

appreciate as a fence, windbreak, or ornamental. Osage orange is a thorny tree; when grown in full sun the thorns can be up to one inch long. After the lower limbs die back they don’t fall off the tree. Eventually a dense thicket of thorns is formed. These thorns are so tough they were the inspiration for barbed wire.

Osage orange, *Maclura pomifera*, is native to Texas and Arkansas. Known for being hardy and drought tolerant, it was planted throughout the United States for windbreaks but has since escaped cultivation to invade ravines, fence lines, ditches, and degraded farmland.

When a single planting was discovered growing along a roadside in Haiku, the concern that the thorns could puncture the tires of passing cars was only one reason for removing the plant. Osage orange has a tendency to be invasive and the Maui Invasive Species Committee hoped to prevent it from becoming a pest on Maui. There was only one known planting, but that came as little consolation to crews as they worked to cut down the hedge. The hard wood was difficult to cut. Thorns punctured boots and tore through multiple layers of clothing. Field crews went home looking as though they’d been wrestling cats all day. The drought tolerant root system survived and root suckers have been found 30 feet from the original planting, even sprouting inside the dark floor of a garden shed on the property. Thousands of root suckers continue to come up, even four years after the plant was controlled, and root suckers, like some neighbors, don’t always respect property lines.

Osage orange is a densely growing tree that reaches a height of 20 to 30 feet. The shiny green leaves are 4 ½ inches long by 2 ½ inches wide. Osage orange is dioecious, meaning that the male and female flowers are on separate plants. The plants found in Haiku were all female, so fortunately the fruit from these plants was infertile. Osage orange can produce many large yellowish-green fruit that resemble an orange. Seeds are dispersed by animals and birds that eat the fruit or ripe fruit can be carried down waterways and deposited downstream. Seedlings commonly take root in disturbed soil and may live for up to 100 years.

A well developed root system helps make the plant drought tolerant as well as hard to remove. One tree in Oklahoma had a root that reached 27 feet into the soil. If there is not enough soil for the root system to penetrate, as on Maui, the roots spread out laterally for great distances. The hard wood was used by the Osage Indians for making bows and later used for fence posts throughout North America and Canada.

Only one plant was known to be on Maui, making this a successful eradication, but there could be more. Osage orange is occasionally sold as an ornamental. If you have this plant or have seen it please contact the Maui Invasive Species Committee at 573-MISC (6472). MISC will remove Osage orange, or any other MISC targets, free of charge. Your neighbors will appreciate it.



The thorns of the Osage orange were the inspiration for barbed wire



A Maui Invasive Species Committee crew surveyed the Osage orange site in Haiku in January 2004. During the eradication work, field crews went home looking as though they had been wrestling cats all day.

- Lissa Fox is the public relations and education specialist with the Maui Invasive Species Committee, or MISC. “Kia’i Moku,” (*Guarding the Island*) is prepared by the Maui Invasive Species Committee to provide information on protecting the island from invasive plants and animals that can threaten the island’s environment, economy and quality of life.