

# Invasive wattle tree taking hold Upcountry

## KIA 'I MOKU

By Lissa Fox



**M**ention “wattle” in a conversation with a Kula or Olinda resident and chances

are you’ll get an earful of information—and not about the facial features of a chicken. Black wattle, or *Acacia mearnsii*, is the fast-growing tree currently choking pastures, gulches, and empty lots across 3,000 acres upcountry on Maui.

Even outside of Kula many people became aware of black wattle following a recent upcountry flood. Piles of dead trees choked gulches on the slopes above Kula, exacerbating flooding conditions caused by a Kona storm. A 2,000 acre forest fire earlier in the year had stripped the upslope area of vegetation. As gulches filled with muddy water, black wattle dams broke free and logs were carried down slope. The floods damaged at least five homes.

Wattle is the common name for *Acacia* species from Australia. Throughout the world, an estimated 1,300 species of *Acacia* inhabit tropical and warm-temperate climates. Hawaii has two native *Acacias*: koa and koaia. Australia is home to 960 species, which evolved to live throughout the wide range of habitats found Down Under, from the rainforest to desert. Several, including black wattle, are invasive on Maui.

The following four wattles, not yet widespread on Maui, could become as notorious as black wattle. Learn how to recognize them and report any sightings.

Earpod wattle, or *Acacia auriculiformis*, is a habitat generalist and can live anywhere on Maui. The seeds of earpod wattle not only survive fire, they have better germination rates following a blaze, and can outcompete native species in recolonizing burned acres. Currently found in only a few places on Maui, earpod wattle was introduced to several experimental agriculture stations and at one



location in Olowalu. This exotic tree, also found on Oahu, has a reputation for invasiveness throughout the Pacific and Asia, including Micronesia, Palau, and Singapore. In Florida, it has invaded many areas, including native pinelands and scrub forests.

The leaves of earpod wattle are flattened leaf stalks, eight inches in length, similar to the sickle-shaped leaf of a koa. The seedpods are the most distinct feature: curled like the folds of an ear. The flowers are typical of *Acacia* trees: miniature yellow pom-poms.

*Acacia mangium* is another fast-growing Australian species. Mangium wattle has a reputation for being invasive in subtropical environments. It is also a habitat generalist and has demonstrated an ability to invade degraded volcanic soils. On Maui, there are only two known locations, both experimental agriculture plantings.

Mangium wattle can be identified by the dark brown to black tightly coiled seedpods. Mangium is a 30’ tall tree, with sickle-shaped leaves and white acacia-type flowers.

Queensland silver wattle, or *Acacia podalyriifolia*, is native to Queensland, Australia. Used both as a garden ornamental and a forestry tree, this tree escaped cultivation to become a pest in areas around Australia. The biological characteristics that make Queensland silver wattle a nice ornamental also help it invade ecosystems: it flowers by the second year and can thrive in a variety of habitats--any of those found in Hawaii. On Maui, Queensland silver wattle is known from



Top Left: Queensland silver wattle with its distinct foliage. *FOREST and KIM STARR photo.*

Bottom Left: Water wattle. *FOREST and KIM STARR photo.*

Above: Magnium wattle can be identified by the large leaves and distinct seedpod. *FOREST & KIM STARR photo*

Below :The earpod wattle, or *Acacia auriculiformis*, can live anywhere on Maui. Its seeds actually do better after burned by fire. *FOREST and KIM STARR photo.*



several residential plantings in Kula, Haiku, and Wailuku.

Queensland silver wattle has a distinct appearance: a small tree with silver-grey leaves covered in light fuzz. Showy golden-yellow pom-pom flowers are arranged in clusters around a central stem.

The final wattle-of-concern, *Acacia retinodes*, or water wattle, is on target for eradication on Maui, with all known locations under active control. Water wattle is another ornamental that spread from a single planting in Kula. Despite its name, the tree is drought-tolerant and has readily escaped cultivation in southern California and Florida.

Water wattle has long, narrow, lance-shaped leaves about five inches long. Unlike other acacias, it flowers throughout the year, a characteristic that lends it another common name: ever-blooming acacia. The flowers are light-yellow pom-poms, and the long, thin seedpods are filled with seeds that germinate easily in Hawaii.

By keeping your eyes open for high-risk wattles on Maui, you can help prevent their spread. Learn how to recognize these pests and report any sightings. Report locations of earpod wattle, mangium wattle, Queensland silver wattle, and water wattle to the Maui Invasive Species Committee at 573-MISC (6472).

■ *Lissa Fox is the public relations and education specialist for the Maui Invasive Species Committee. “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. For more information visit [www.mauiisc.org](http://www.mauiisc.org)*