

Column

Chad Blair: Have You Hugged An ‘Exceptional Tree’ Lately?

They are everywhere in Hawaii, even though most people probably have never heard of the state program.



By Chad Blair    / About 8 hours ago

 Reading time: 6 minutes.



It may be over 150 feet tall with a trunk as thick as a Humvee, but the kapok tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) on Keeaumoku Street in Honolulu is still easy to miss.

Situated on the grounds of the state Department of Agriculture between the bustling streets of Beretania and Young, it's mostly ignored by folks passing by. About the only people who frequent the area to lie blissfully beneath the tree's great canopy are those who are homeless. The hollows and cavities formed by the massive roots of the kapok are, sadly, littered

with trash.

That's not the tree's fault, though, and the kapok deserves our attention and respect. In fact, it is known as an "exceptional" tree, one of more than 1,000 in the state that are so designated. Look closely on the kapok's Ewa side and you'll spy a small metallic plaque denoting the honor.



The giant kapok tree along Keaauomoku Street between Young and King streets is exceptional.

Exceptional trees are trees nominated to a county's Arborist Advisory Committee for consideration based on age, history, location, uniqueness, size, aesthetic significance and other factors. The Exceptional Tree Ordinance, enacted by the Hawaii Legislature way back in 1975, safeguards the trees from manmade damage or destruction on both public and private land. It was vigorously backed by groups such as the [Mokihana Club of Kauai](#) and The Outdoor Circle.

The program, [run by The Outdoor Circle](#), also keeps our communities

green, especially in the urban core where ever more high-rises threaten to consume our land and sky.

Click [on this map](#) to find the trees. And click on the colored dots (green for trees visible from the street, red for ones that are inaccessible) to learn details and see photos.

Banyans, Kapoks, Monkeypods And More

Exceptional trees are on all islands except Niihau and Kahoolawe. Oahu has the most and they are concentrated in places like Kapiolani Park and Ala Moana Beach Park. There are several in Waikiki, like the banyan oceanside at the Westin Moana Surfrider and the one in the International Market Place (the tree survived the mall's renovation).

Among other well-known exceptional trees are the four Indian banyans at Thomas Square, a monkeypod in Moanalua Gardens (a draw for Japanese tourists because it is [the logo for Hitachi](#)) and the enormous Indian banyan in the Lahaina Courthouse Square on Maui.

Familiar trees that used to be on the registry but, for reasons unclear, are no longer exceptional are the 168-foot Norfolk pine fronting the Lodge at Koele in Lanai City and the banyans that shade Banyan Drive in Hilo. The banyans were planted by luminaries such as Franklin Roosevelt, Richard Nixon, Cecil B. DeMille, Babe Ruth and Amelia Earhart.



This monkeypod on Paki Avenue mauka of the Honolulu Zoo is exceptional as well.

Exceptional trees are not just banyans, monkeypods and kapoks. Add to the list skunk, hog plum, hau, olive, baobab, false kamani, mahogany, Bodhi, Singapore plumeria, tamarind plumeria, tattele, weeping fig, earpod, Panama tree, Indian gooseberry, Mexican cohune nut palm trees and many more.

But many areas on Oahu have no exceptional trees even though there are lots of trees: Kakaako, Kalihi, Waianae, Ewa Beach, and from Waimea Bay to Kaaawa on the North Shore. The same goes for huge swaths of Kauai, Maui, Molokai and the Big Island.

Myles Ritchie, the programs director for the nonprofit The Outdoor Circle, says that may be because many people are unaware of the exceptional tree program.

“At the end of the day, the Big Island should have many more exceptional trees,” he said. “But the whole program is based on the nominating

process. The property owner has to sign off on it to become exceptional.”

The Big Island’s Arborist Advisory Committee was inactive for several years, said Ritchie, but is now in the process of reforming. That could lead to more exceptional trees.

As an incentive, owners of trees that qualify as exceptional can get [a \\$3,000 tax credit](#) every three years for maintenance and upkeep.

A Good Time For Trees

Ritchie said the interactive map and database for the exceptional trees — including GPS coordinates — are in the process of being updated. He is also looking to make sure the trees have explanatory plaques, as some may have fallen off or been vandalized.

Probably [the oldest exceptional tree](#) is an orange tree in South Kona that is believed to have been planted in 1792 during Captain George Vancouver’s visit. One of the tallest exceptional trees is a Mindanao gum at Wahiawa Botanical Garden — more than 200 feet tall.

It’s been a good couple of months for trees and the people who love them in Hawaii.

On Oct. 8 a new monkeypod tree was dedicated in Moiliili Triangle in Honolulu, replacing the ailing Chinese banyan that was removed in August.



A giant banyan near the Waikiki Aquarium, one of two exceptional trees in the area.

On Nov. 3, Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell kicked off the Arbor Day Festival at Foster Botanical Garden, where he announced that the city is committed to Honolulu’s “urban forest” with a goal of planting 100,000 trees by 2025. The city has a new website where the public, private and government sectors can log and map the locations of tree plantings.

That same week state officials on Kauai marked that island’s 50th anniversary of an Arbor Day plant and tree sale and giveaway.

And the Department of Land and Natural Resources is now accepting nominations for [the National Big Tree competition](#). It seeks to find the biggest tree species in the U.S. “to promote and preserve our tree species.”

Hawaii currently has 18 “national champion” trees, including its first — a 42-foot Ohia ai with sweet fruit on a private family lot in Lawai, Kauai. In

all, 21 Hawaii species are eligible for Big Tree nominations, including koa, wiliwili and mamane.

My advice?

Get out of your car, go sit or lie under a tree, appreciate the roots below [“talking” to other trees](#). And maybe pick up some of trash before you leave.

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