

Neneleau, Hawaiian sumac

Rhus sandwicensis Gray

Cashew family (Anacardiaceae)

Native species (endemic)

Small deciduous native tree forming thickets in lowlands, with large compound leaves and wavy toothed leaflets paired except at end, and with whitish almost tasteless sap. To 15–25 ft (4.5–7.6 m) high and 4–12 inches (0.1–43 m) in trunk diameter, spreading by stems from creeping roots. Bark brown gray, smooth. Inner bark whitish within green outer layer, bitter. Twigs stout, light green, with rusty brown pressed hairs and with hairy rounded buds above U-shaped leaf-scars.

Leaves alternate, large, pinnate, 12–18 inches (30–46 cm) long, with yellow green hairy axis round and enlarged at base, not winged. Leaflets mostly 11–15, paired and almost stalkless except 1 at end, lanceshaped or oblong, 2–4 inches (5–10 cm) long and 1–2 inches (2.5–5 cm) wide, long-pointed at apex, rounded and unequal-sided at base, wavy toothed, thin, with many nearly straight side veins raised beneath, above dull green and almost hairless, beneath paler and finely hairy, red when young and again turning red before falling.

Flower clusters (panicles) terminal, erect, very large, 6–12 inches (15–30 cm) long, much branched, finely hairy. Flowers very numerous, crowded, small, about 1/8 inch (3 mm) long and broad, short-stalked, pale yellow, composed of calyx of five hairy green sepals united at base, corolla of five petals spreading and turned back, five stamens, and pistil with ovary and two or three short styles.

Fruit (drupe) egg-shaped, more than 1/8 inch (3 mm) long, flattened, reddish, hairy, single-seeded.

The wood is described as yellowish gray with dark resinous streaks, lightweight, coarse-textured, and tough. It has been used for saddle trees on Hawaiian ranches. Formerly, it served for ox yokes and plows.

The bark has been used locally for tanning goat skins. According to Degener, a keg of bark was shipped to Boston in 1868. Again in 1918, commercial use was considered but was abandoned because of a fungal disease that killed some plants. The shrubs are showy and ornamental.

Neneleau is found in the lowland forest zone at 600–2000 ft (183–6190 m) elevation or above. Common on

the island of Hawaii and uncommon and in scattered or isolated thickets in Kauai, Oahu, Molokai, and Maui. It is common along highways near Hilo, Hawaii, and along the Hamakua coast.

Special area

Waiakea

Range

Hawaii only

Other common name

neleau

Botanical synonyms

Rhus chinensis var. *sandwicensis* (Gray) Deg. & Greenwell, *R. semialata* Murr. var. *sandwicensis* (Gray) Engler

This is the only native Hawaiian representative of its family. Several introduced species are better known. The Hawaiian plants have been treated also as a variety of the Asiatic species Chinese sumac, *Rhus chinensis* Mill., which ranges from Japan through southern China to India. That species differs in that the leaf axes are winged and it has larger red fruits 5/16 inch (8 mm) in diameter, reported to be edible.



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Flowering twig, 1/2 X; flowers (lower right),
2 X and 4 X (Degener).