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Hana Hou!

THE MAGAZINE OF HAWAIIAN AIRLINES



The Koa Growers

story by **Paul Wood**
photo by **Chris McDonough**

Last year, a wildfire torched 1,800 acres of Maui's Kula Forest Reserve. For two weeks the towering smoke made Haleakala look as though it had erupted again. A disaster, yes, but with a plus side: The fire eliminated an artificial forest of non-native pine, cypress and redwood, creating the opportunity for state forestry officials to do something they would have never considered in the old days—plant natives. The disaster also gave a small Upcountry business called Native Nursery a well-timed boost roughly equivalent to the effect of spinach on Popeye. Thanks to seven-plus years of experimentation in the rarified world of cultivating Hawaiian native plants, NN partners Ethan Romanchak and Jonathan Keyser successfully landed the bid on this huge job, requiring them to triple their capacity. They're growing 150,000 seedlings of mamane, 'ohi'a, koa, naio and 'a'alii to be ready for planting. To bid confidently, they relied on their years of meticulous note-taking and their own innovations in low-cost bench-building, shadehouse construction and growing techniques.



When I visit, Jonathan pops the lid off a 5-gallon drum filled with 80,000 koa seeds they've collected on the mountainside and lets me plunge my hands into a wealth of shimmering ebony gems. "Now nobody will ever say, 'We can't grow a koa forest because there aren't enough seedlings,'" he says. "We are now accepting orders of over 100,000." Both of these men—30-ish, Maui-born-and-raised, fathers, college-educated—chose the mission of ecological restoration over more conventional careers. Ethan remembers, as a teenager, waking up to the fact that a lot of the Hawaiian landscape is now filled with invasive plants from elsewhere that are crowding out natives. It was a revelation and something he and Jonathan are committed to being a part of changing. They have no doubt that they are in the vanguard. Says Ethan, "We were waiting for this." **HH**

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