

January 15, 2017 |

[Features](#)

Maui County Planting Plan is arborist's legacy

By Valerie Monson, Special to the Star-Advertiser
January 15, 2017



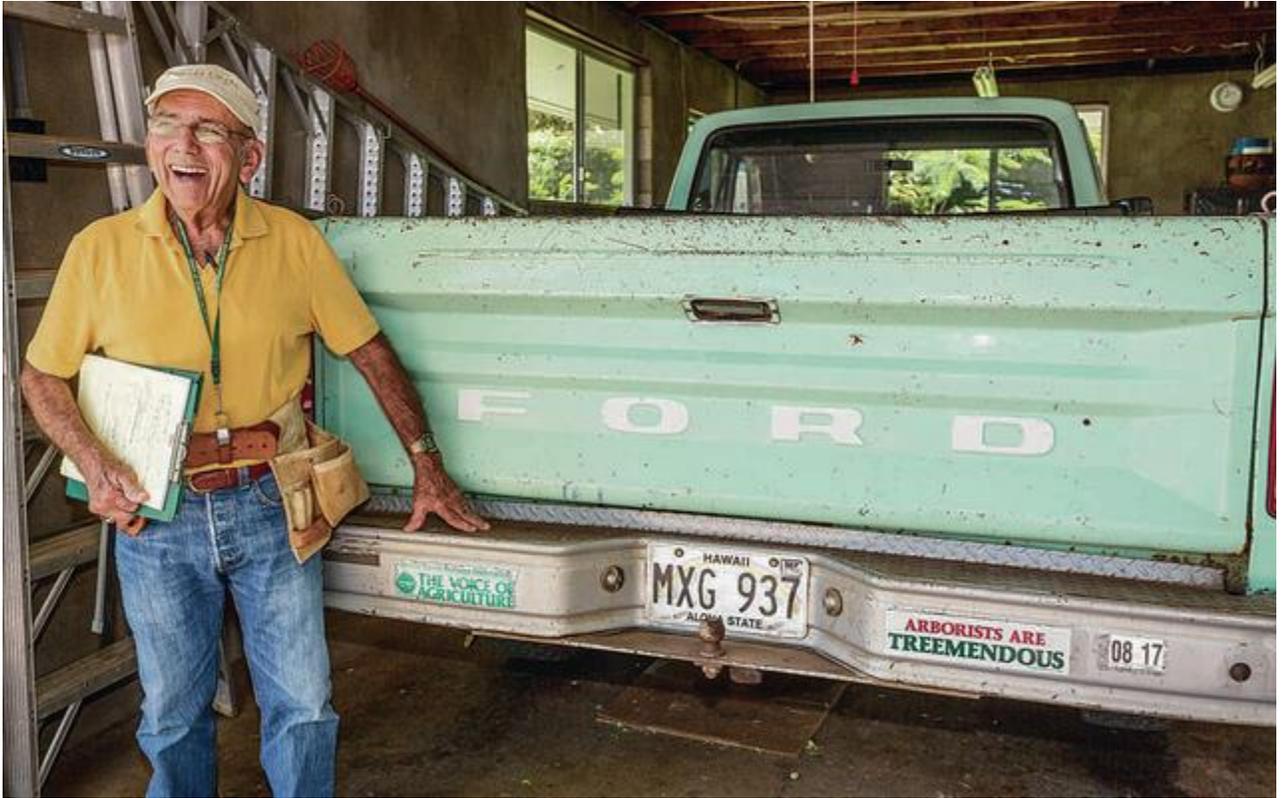
• BRYAN BERKOWITZ / SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

Ernie Rezens stands in front of his manicured lawn.



BRYAN BERKOWITZ / SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

Ernie Rezens examines kumquats.



BRYAN BERKOWITZ / SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

Ernie Rezens with his signature classic green Ford truck at his home in Makawao, Maui.

MAKAWAO >> Whether he's driving down Hana Highway, parking his pickup truck at the University of Hawaii Maui College or pattering around his home in Makawao, Ernie Rezens feels like he's standing in his own front yard.

In a way he is.

When it comes to the Maui landscape, Rezens has evolved into its Tree of Knowledge. After creating the agriculture program at Maui Community College in 1975, he has become one of the state's most respected arborists, coordinating a multitude of public planting projects that have beautified many former eyesores across the county.

Rezens recently completed his crowning glory: the third edition of the Maui County Planting Plan.

"Some have said this guide is my legacy and I agree with that; it is my legacy," said Rezens from his living room where trees are visible from every window. "Maui is my island. I was born here. I grew up here. I raised my family here. I want to leave it a better place."

Word of Rezens' impact on Maui's outdoors has traveled far beyond the palm fronds. In 2015, he was one of three arborists from around the world presented with the True Professional Award

by the International Society of Arboriculture, such a rare plum that he thought the phone call delivering the news was a prank.

“That’s Ernie, he’s so humble,” said Elaine Malina, president of Maui Green and Beautiful, the organization that prepared the nomination. “This is one of the top honors an arborist can receive. Only one other person in Hawaii has gotten it (Steve Nims of Oahu).

“And what made this so unique is that even though Maui Green and Beautiful did the paperwork, the nomination came from the Maui community. We got all these support letters from people around Maui who Ernie has taught and influenced over the years.”

ALL THOSE years have included decades of teaching at the college (now called University of Hawaii Maui College) where he is professor emeritus, working with landscape architects or volunteers on planting trees or saving others, writing nearly 100 articles on the care of trees for the Maui News and, finally, providing the encyclopedic planting manual at the request of the Maui Arborist Committee.

“Ernie is just always teaching in one way or another,” Malina said. “He’s constantly giving back.”

What’s most remarkable about the latest update of the Maui County Planting Plan is not only what it contains, but what it does not. Keeping up with the times, there is a new chapter on including native and Polynesian-introduced plants and trees in various landscapes, but there is not a single invasive species recommended — except for turf grass.

Although Rezens has seen firsthand the destruction caused by invasive trees, it wasn’t an easy decision to make.

“I had to leave out some of my favorites because they’re invasive,” he admitted. “I love — I really love — the African tulip tree, it’s so beautiful, but it’s invasive. It had to go.”

The 243-page document — more like a book waiting for a publisher — includes detailed maps of planting zones for Maui, Molokai, Lanai and Kahoolawe that were prepared by longtime forester Bob Hobdy. To determine the right trees, hedges, plants and grasses for your area, simply look for your zone and then find the corresponding recommendations.

The plan is intended for use by anyone: government officials, landscape architects, developers and backyard gardeners. There is information on planting, replanting, general care, pruning, fertilizer usage, irrigation and conservation methods.

Rezens hopes the Maui guide will eventually go statewide. So far, Maui is the only county with such a plan, but it can easily be turned into a blueprint for the other islands.

“This can serve as a planting plan for all Hawaii,” he said. “All that’s needed are maps of planting zones for the other islands. Then the Maui County Planting Plan becomes the State of Hawaii Planting Plan.”

The guide is available online and in the resource sections at Maui County libraries, but plans are in the works to get it published for sale, said Sue Kiang, Maui County Partnership and Community Program coordinator who serves as staff support for the Arborist Committee.

“We know there are people who prefer hard copies to online reading,” Kiang said. “It’s such an exciting prospect that the Maui plan could go statewide. It’s just a credit to Ernie. The care he takes in doing research is awesome and reflective of the stature he enjoys across the state.”

WHILE REZENTS has had an affinity for nature since childhood — his family had a greenhouse when he was young and he mowed lawns to help pay for tuition at St. Anthony School — he did not, early on, see it as a career.

His first love was electricity. He began teaching about electrical concepts and physics at what was then Maui Community College.

“I love science,” he said. “Physics and chemistry are what makes us function. But I missed the biological aspect.”

To feel complete, he obtained his master’s degree in biology and shifted his course at the college by teaching physics and botany (“a very unusual combination,” he acknowledged).

Ever curious, Rezens became more interested in the science of plants, the makeup of soils and pest control. His growing knowledge was contagious and he was asked to develop an agricultural program for the college. After all his work in creating a curriculum, Rezens was not even around the year the program debuted: He had been awarded a National Science Foundation grant to study arboriculture at the University of California-Davis.

It was there he found his true calling.

“Trees, I just admire trees,” he said, surrounded by an urban forest. “So many people see them as only making rubbish. We need trees for so many reasons. And aren’t they magnificent? Just look at that monkeypod — those massive limbs holding up enormous weight, I’m amazed it can stand up. Trees give us fruit and food, they give us oxygen, they give us shade.”

And they grow the economy. Rezens is convinced that shopping mall parking lots with large-canopy trees that create shade for vehicles attract more customers.

“It’s proven by research,” he said. “If parking lots have shade, people will travel farther to shop there, stay longer, spend more money and come back more often.”

THERE ARE entire chapters in his planting plan on the proper way to plant trees in parking lots and along streets. Readers will learn how much room different species require for their roots to spread. Rezens almost seethes when he thinks of all the parking areas that have been so poorly designed.

“I think it’s a mortal sin for a parking lot to have all these trees that have been topped into lollipops,” he said. “It’s bad for the trees and no one wants to park there.”

On the other hand, you can barely find an empty space at the UH Maui College parking lot where Rezens and his students planted a timberland of monkeypods in 1979.

“This is the Ernie Rezens parking lot,” he said proudly beneath the majestic stand of trees. “This is the best shaded parking lot I’ve ever seen — and it’s always full.”

Across from the lot, more of Rezens’ handiwork rises from the median strips dividing busy Kaahumanu Avenue, one of Central Maui’s main thoroughfares. The promenade of royal poinciana trees and Pritchardia palms was planted in 1995 by a group of 70 volunteers, adding a burst of nature in the middle of the asphalt.

“There had been previous efforts to plant here, but they didn’t have water,” Rezens said. “The key to our project was we got funding for irrigation. It took a long time, but it was worth the wait. You’ve got to have water.”

REZENTS’ HOME in Makawao reflects his leafy philosophy. It’s a refuge of shade provided by nearly 30 assorted trees that thrive in his yard: some of those herculean monkeypods he so admires, along with a variety of citrus, two kinds of avocados grafted together (“one for salads, the other for guacamole”), macadamia nuts, papayas and more.

Sadly, there’s also a massive stump of an old friend no longer there.

“That was a Cook pine, it was 110 years old, 120 feet high, but it was dropping branches (on the street) and becoming a liability,” said Rezens as tears welled up in his eyes. “Taking that tree down was very painful, very emotional. I consider trees to be part of our family.”

Even in the house, trees pop up in the pictures on the walls. A family photo of Rezens and his wife, Alene, on their 50th wedding anniversary shows their extended ohana framed by the trees in the front yard.

IT WAS BACK in 1981 that Mayor Hannibal Tavares proposed creating the Maui County Arborist Committee and appointed Rezens as one of its original members. The mayor then asked Rezens to produce a planting plan that would use common trees and plants to make the county a more beautiful place.

Rezens issued two previous versions of the Maui County Planting Plan. He has never been paid for his work on the three editions and has relied on many friends to review chapters and assist in other ways. (He particularly thanks Christine Andrews.)

The guide is his gift to his beloved Maui. And now, with its detailed planting zone maps, a chapter on native plants, the elimination of invasives and emphasizing shade for parking lots, the Maui County Planting Plan, Rezens proudly declared, is complete.

Just add water.

The Maui County Planting Plan is available online at mauicounty.gov; hard copies are available at Maui County libraries. For more information, contact Sue Kiang at 808-984-4051 or email sue.kiang@co.maui.hi.us.

Valerie Monson is a freelance writer who lives on Maui.