

Offer a graduation lei with warmth, and ask the graduate before placing it around their neck. A considerate gift also reflects the recipient's wishes, the lei's significance, and any ceremony guidelines.

Know what the gift can express

In Hawai'i, people give lei to show affection, respect, welcome, and other feelings. At graduation, a lei recognizes the graduate and lets you share in an important occasion. Lei traditions are deeply connected to Hawaiian culture, but practices are not identical in every family or community.

You can keep your greeting simple; there is no need to make a speech or suggest a cultural connection that is not yours. If you are joining a celebration hosted by a family whose practices you do not know, ask a family member what would be appropriate. Listening to their guidance is more respectful than making assumptions.

Pick something suited to the graduate

Lei can be made from fresh flowers, leaves, seeds, shells, and other materials. Some graduation lei use ribbon, candy, or different items. Think about what the graduate would enjoy wearing rather than treating size as a measure of how meaningful the gift is.

Take allergies, sensitivity to fragrance, and clothing into account. A strongly scented flower lei may bother someone who reacts to perfume or other smells. Materials may also leave marks or shed, so check about delicate clothes if that could be an issue. For a graduate who is traveling, consider how easily the lei can be carried and whether plant materials are allowed at the destination.

Give the lei at the right moment

Look for a pause when the graduate is available to greet you. Hold the lei open, congratulate them, and ask if they would like you to put it on. If they prefer to do that themselves, offer it in their hands. Asking first also helps avoid disturbing their hair or cap.

Some people observe a custom of giving a pregnant person an open lei instead of a closed one. Customs vary, so check with the recipient or someone close to them if you are uncertain. If the graduate says no, accept that choice without asking them to justify it.

Think about the event and what follows

A school or venue may limit what a graduate can wear during the ceremony. Find out about the rules ahead of time, or save the lei for after the event. Give the graduate room to take photos, greet relatives, and speak with other people waiting to offer congratulations.

Keep a lei made from fresh flowers cool and treat it gently until you give it. After receiving it, the graduate can choose whether to wear it, store it, or dispose of it. Some people would rather not take a lei off in front of the person who gave it to them, but their comfort and the circumstances are what matter. A custom should not be imposed as a rule for everyone.

Questions people often ask

Is it appropriate for someone who is not Hawaiian to give a lei?

Yes. Give it thoughtfully, and do not present yourself as an expert on Hawaiian traditions.

Do I need permission before putting the lei on?

Yes. Asking lets the graduate decide and helps protect their personal space, hair, and clothes.

Is giving several lei acceptable?

Yes, provided the graduate is comfortable wearing or carrying them and the venue permits them.

How should I respond if the graduate refuses the lei?

Accept their decision kindly. They do not need to wear your gift for your congratulations to be sincere.

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