

Feature: THE SOAPNUT



Nuts over soap

The Indian soapnut is gaining in popularity with people who want to use a natural cleaning product. **Amanda Sloan** goes nuts for a tree you can grow in your own backyard.

Imagine having your own washing soap growing in your garden. It's what people do in Nepal, washing the finest of silks using the soapnut. In India they've been doing it for centuries, and it's possible to do it in New Zealand too.

The soapnut tree belongs to the Sapindaceae family, and produces small, round nuts which can be boiled or ground up to make an eco-friendly detergent.

The flowers form in large panicles and each flower is small and creamy white. The fruit - the soapnut - is a small, yellow, leathery-skinned drupe, 1–2cm in diameter that ripens to black, containing one to three seeds.

There are several varieties of tree used to make soap, with the most commonly grown commercially being the soapnut tree (*Sapindus mukorossi*). The other option is the Western soapberry tree (*Sapindus saponaria*). The trees do take a few years to produce, but they are worth the wait for your own natural, economical soap supply.

The soapnut tree's berries (or "nuts") contain superior saponin concentrations but trees take up to 10 years to reach the fruit-bearing stage. It is an easy tree to germinate, but not suitable for frosty zones of New Zealand as it prefers tropical or subtropical conditions.

The soapnut tree grows between 12-20 metres high, although in its natural habitat it can grow up to 75 metres high, with a trunk 3–5 metres wide.

The Western soapberry tree is a smaller tree and grows well in coastal areas. It takes three years to produce soapnut berries and has more compact growth. The berries contain less saponin and are not retailed as a cleaner, although they are suitable for home use and have a quicker production time. This tree is also more hardy and resilient than the soapnut tree. Seeds are available from September-February.

When the soapnuts are ripe they fall off the tree, nestled in a firm outer shell (nut). They are then sun-dried whole without any added chemicals, and the result is the soapnut or Western soapberry.

The nuts contain saponins which form mild suds similar to soap, giving you the ability to clean and wash. The herb soapwort (*Saponaria officinalis*) has similar properties, and is used to soothe eczema. Saponins have many other actions eg, they can act as an expectorant.

Soapnuts, also referred to as washing



nuts or washing berries, can be used to clean clothes and household items. Certified organic in several countries, they are becoming a popular choice as they are a completely natural washing option: no foams, no synthetic chemicals.

The nuts were originally grown in both North and South India but are now found in China, Hawaii and Florida, and can be grown successfully in other parts of the world too.

Serge Balmer of SmartRange imports and sells soapnuts in New Zealand. Serge moved here from Switzerland in 2005, and started selling eco-friendly products including soapnuts, the Bokashi indoor composting system and EM (Effective Microorganisms) products.

The soapnuts he imports are certified organic (not all soapnuts are) from India, where soapnut trees grow wild. Commercial growers who go for mass production are less likely to be organic.

Serge sells whole soapnut seeds to grow yourself, soapnuts to make detergent,

and biodegradable sachets of ground, ready-to-use soapnuts for the washing machine or dishwasher. The soapnuts are anti-microbial, so they are safe on the environment too.

When washing laundry, soapnuts keep colours bright, and maintain clothing structure. When mixed with water the mild-smelling suds create a gentle liquid soap so there is no problem with the laundry detergent not dissolving, as can sometimes happen with powder detergents.

Water surface tension is reduced as the saponins are released from the shell, freeing dirt, oil and grime from fabrics. The saponins also help to break down grey water in septic tank systems, and you use far less water because the rinse cycle can be omitted.

For someone with allergies, with skin conditions like eczema and dermatitis, or who wants to be kinder to the environment, soapnuts are a good alternative. Washing powders use chemicals like phosphates, ammonia, optical brighteners etc, which can irritate the skin causing rashes, itches, allergies and sinus problems.

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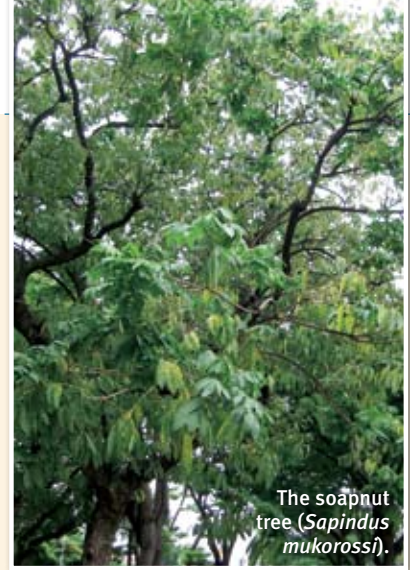
How to grow your own soap

You need plenty of patience when growing the soapnut tree. The Western soapberry is quicker to produce and a smaller tree, but the soapnut tree, although taking longer to produce nuts, has a stronger soap strength.

- You can obtain either seed from www.soapnuts.co.nz. The best time to plant is spring or early summer, and the seeds are best planted as soon as they are obtained - do not store them.
- Scarify the seed by piercing the outer shell/husk either using a gentle tap with a hammer to crack the seed, or a nail file or sand paper to weaken the coat. This helps with germination.
- Soak the seed overnight in warm/hot water - a thermos is ideal.
- Sow several centimetres deep in seed-raising or potting mix for best results. It's not advised to use nitrogen as a fertiliser, as this can inhibit germination. A well-drained soil is important, although it's important to keep seed mix wet.

Being a sub-tropical/tropical plant it loves the rain.

- Place pots in a warm, sunny area, or use bright lights if you have a dark house. Hot water cupboards are not advised, although a green house is suitable. It may take between 4-12 weeks to germinate, as the seed will swell to double its original size and form a white powder coating around the seed. This is normal and means the seedling is about to emerge.
- When seedlings emerge, re-pot into a large container or planter bag. The soapnut has a very long taproot so it needs space length-wise. Once it starts to grow it will grow fast - about 30cm every month.
- As the plant gets bigger you will need to transplant it into increasingly larger pots. Keep it in a sunny spot and plant it in the ground at around two years of age.
- The soapnut tree grows quite high - you won't need quite so much



The soapnut tree (*Sapindus mukorossi*).

room if you're growing the Western soapberry.

- The tree flowers during summer and berries are collected in winter. Collect the ripe berries, then sun-dry the seeds. Crack and de-seed before use, using the berry shell to wash, and use as soap. Replant the inner seeds again.
- Storing soapnuts is vital to their longevity. Keep in airtight containers or whole nuts will go sticky if left exposed (although they will still be useable).

NO Spray
NO Mess
NO Weeds



- Wandering Jew (Willie)
- Woolly nightshade
- Old man's beard
- Gorse
- Kahili ginger
- Agapanthus
- Cotoneaster



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How to use soapnuts

CLOTHING

Put 3 – 6 soapnut shells into a muslin bag and add to one load of washing. These can be re-used several times.

DISHWASHER

Put 5 - 6 soapnuts shells into a wash bag and secure to cutlery holder. Adding vinegar to rinse aid dispenser helps glasses/cutlery to sparkle.

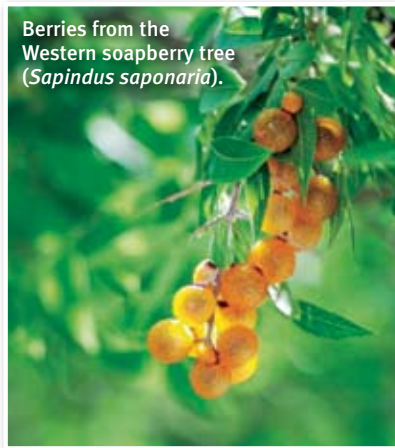
LIQUID SOAP

To make liquid soap, simmer 100g of soapnuts in 12 cups of water for 30 minutes. Cool and strain liquid into a bottle to create a concentrated, chemical-free detergent. Use three Tbsp for laundry detergent, one Tbsp of liquid soap mixed with one Tbsp of water to wash hair, and two Tbsp of liquid soap to a bath for bubbles. It is suitable to use with babies, and you can add essential oils for extra aroma. Shells can then be composted, meaning the soapnut is environmentally friendly to the end.

OTHER USES

Commercially, soapnuts are a popular ingredient in shampoos, cleansers and medicines, are used as a treatment for eczema and psoriasis, and for removing freckles. Soapnuts have gentle insecticidal properties, so diluted liquid can also remove lice from the scalp.

In India and Indonesia they are used by jewellers to remove tarnish from silver. They are also tasty food plants for larvae of some Lepidoptera (moths and butterflies) species. Soapnuts can also be used as soap



Berries from the Western soapberry tree (*Sapindus saponaria*).



on the skin. The liquid soap is anti-fungal and anti-bacterial, so is good for rinsing sores, and cleansing can be done regularly as soapnuts are gentle on skin.

From a medicinal perspective, soapnuts have been used in many ways but you should seek the advice of a natural health practitioner before using soapnuts in a medicinal way. ■



Where to find soapnuts & seeds

Soapnuts by SmartRange

www.soapnuts.co.nz
Phone 07 929 7040 Fax 07 929 7041
6 Ruby Place, Papamoa 3118

The SoapNut Shop

www.thesoapnutshop.co.nz
Phone 09 816 8970

Global Soap

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