

grow your own Soap



by Amanda Sloan and Dunja Balmer,
from *The SoapNut Shop*.

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

The soapnuts can also be used on the skin. The liquid soap is antifungal and antibacterial, so good for rinsing sores, etc. Cleansing can be done regularly, as it's gentle on the skin.

It is also good for hair, balancing and repairing oily or dry hair.

So growing the soapnut or soapberry tree to produce your own soapnuts is a worthwhile and cost-effective project.

Soapnut Tree (*Sapindus mukorossi*)

A deciduous tree of the Sapindaceae family, the soapnut produces berries in 9-10 years. It is the berries that are the most widely used for washing, as the seeds do not produce saponin.

It is a tropical/subtropical tree and enjoys warm climates with annual rainfalls of 150-200cm. It may grow to 12-20 metres high in 70 years with a trunk girth of 3.5m, but will be smaller in cooler climates. It prefers tropical or subtropical conditions so position in a sunny spot. It grows in deep, clayey, loam soil.

It is a handsome tree found throughout most of India, and also found in China, Hawaii and Florida. The leaves measure 40cm long. The tree resembles large Mimosa trees to some extent.

It flowers during summer and the berries

are collected during winter months. The small flowers turn to yellow leathery-skinned fruit and turn black when ripe.

Soapberry Tree (*Sapindus saponaria*)

The Western soapberry tree is a smaller, more compact and hardier than the soapnut tree, and grows well in coastal areas.

It takes three years to produce berries which contain less saponin than the soapnut berries and are not of high enough quality for retailing as a cleaner.

These seeds are available September-February each year.

To grow your own

1. The best time to plant is spring or early summer. The seeds are best planted as soon as obtained; do not store.

2. Scarify the seed, ie. pierce the outer shell/husk. This can be done with a hammer cracking the seed. Or a nail file or sand paper to weaken the coat. This helps the germination, and also staggers the process to disperse the crops.

3. Soak the seed overnight in warm/hot water; a thermos is ideal.

4. Sow the seeds about several centimetres into seed raising or potting mix. It's not advisable to use nitrogen as a fertiliser as this can inhibit germination.

5. One idea is to use a two-litre plastic bottle for a pot. Cut out the top and drill holes into the bottom.

6. A well-drained soil is important, although it's important to keep the seed mix wet. Being a sub-tropical/tropical plant, it loves the rain.

7. Place in a warm sunny area, or use bright lights if you have a dark house. Hot water cupboards are not recommended, although a green house is suitable. Make a

mini greenhouse by inverting another cut-down milk bottle over the top.

8. It may take between one to three months to germinate.

9. Seed will swell to double its original size. A white powder coating forms around the seed, this is normal, it means that the seedling is about to emerge.

10. When the plant emerges, re-pot into a large container or plant bag. It has a very long main root so it needs space length-wise.

11. Once it starts to grow it will grow fast. About 30cm per month is what to expect.

12. As the plant gets bigger transplant it into larger pots. Keep it in a sunny spot, and eventually plant into the ground. This is usually after about two years.

13. The tree grows eventually quite tall, so allow for space, how much depends on whether it is the soapnut or the Western soapberry tree.

How to prepare and use

When the tree fruits, collect the ripe berries, sun dry, and then crack and deseed before use. Use the soapnut berry shell to wash, and replant the seeds.

How you store them is vital for their longevity. They are best kept in airtight containers. The whole nuts will go sticky if left exposed, however these are still able to be used.

- Put 3-6 soapnut shells into a muslin bag in the washing machine. These can be

re-used several times.

- Use 5-6 soapnuts shells in the wash bag in the cutlery holder of the dishwasher. (Adding vinegar to the rinse-aid dispenser helps glasses/cutlery to sparkle.)

- To make liquid soap, simmer soapnuts in water for 30 minutes. Cool and strain. This can also replace washing powder, or be used as shampoo or bubble bath.

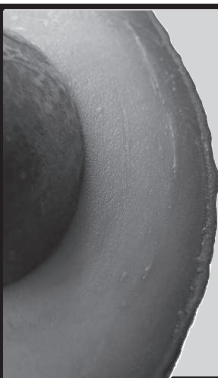
- Used shells can then be composted. They are environmentally friendly right to the end.

Advantages

Water surface tension is reduced as the saponins are released from the shell. This frees dirt, oil and grime from the laundry or surface. They help to break down grey water in the septic system. Also the rinse cycle can be omitted, saving water., soapnuts don't need rinsing out like other detergents.

For washing laundry, the soapnuts keep colours bright and maintain clothing structure. When mixed with water, these mild-smelling suds create a gentle liquid soap. For somebody with allergies (eczema or dermatitis) or wanting to be kinder to the environment it's the ideal product. And there is no problem with powder not dissolving, which happens with some laundry detergents.

For further details or to purchase seeds or soapnut products, please contact Dunja on 07 929 7117 or see the website www.soapnuts.co.nz.



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