From the Potting Bench

Soap Plant

Many of you may be familiar with our watershed's native soap plant or soaproot. The mature plant has a fibrous bulb with a heart usable as soap when crushed. While most recognizable for that feature, the plant reveals other aspects giving it a certain panache.

Soap plant seedlings at the FOSC nursery ready to be "bumped up" to a larger pot size.

The plant is a true local, native to California and Oregon. Long known to indigenous communities (the Coast Miwok call it hakka), it was named by a German botanist, Karl Kunth, who classified plants collected in 1804 by the naturalist colossus Alexander von Humboldt. In Latin, soap plant is grandly known as Chlorogalum pomeridianum. The plant was known in the Spanish era as amole.

The genus Chlorogalum comes from the Greek, meaning green milk or juice. This green substance from crushed leaves has been used by indigenous people as a tattoo ink. The species name, pomeridianum, or "of the afternoon," refers to the plant flower which blooms in the late afternoon and on into the evening and night. Our time convention of p.m., or post meridiem, is a more common use of the idea.

Soap plant in bloom nearing sunset. Photo by Kate Berlin.

Indigenous people have used soaproot in various ways—as food, medicine, and raw material for a host of applications. Apart from young leaves consumed raw or roasted, the bulb has been used as a basic food item, but with a caveat. Because of toxins (saponins), the bulb has to be baked for many hours, usually in stone-lined pits. Once done, the bulb becomes caramelized and has a sweet taste. The Washoe people reportedly provided soap plant to the stranded Donner Party in 1846-47. The bulb also comes into play for medicinal uses. Fresh bulbs when crushed have been used topically for cramps and rheumatism. A decoction or simmering of bulbs produces a liquid used as a diuretic, laxative, and to treat stomach aches. A crushed, baked bulb has been used to create a poultice for cleaning and healing sores and treating rashes. But beyond food and medicine, soap plant has prodigious material uses.

Soap plant bulb. Photo © DSchiel courtesy of Friends of Edgewood

As the common name suggests, the bulb stripped of its fibrous outer layer has been used as a soap by indigenous communities over generations. The lather from the crushed bulb, when diluted with water, has been used for washing the body, hair, fabric, and utensils. The cooking liquid has been used as a glue for fletching arrows and lining baskets. And leaving nothing to waste, the tough outer fibers of the bulb can be made into brushes and mattress stuffing. Even the plant's toxic properties have uses. Lice and fleas fall to the lather, and as an effective food collection method, crushed bulbs were once placed in streams for the purpose of paralyzing fish—a practice that was eventually outlawed in California.

The moniker "soap" does only partial justice to the plethora of uses of this versatile plant.

—Peter Van der Naillen,
FOSC Native Plant Nursery Volunteer