

Learning about Soap Bark Tree

Quillaja saponaria

The Soap Bark Tree is a slender tree found on the western slopes of Chile and Peru. The bark of this tree has a substance called saponin, which has medicinal uses for respiratory ailments. Saponin is bitter tasting and produces foam when shaken in water.

Characteristics. The Soap Bark Tree is an evergreen tree that reaches a height of 18 m (59 ft). The oval leaves are glossy green, leathery and are 3-5 cm in length. It is considered a moderate to slow-growing tree. Plants are hardy down to -12° C and are drought resistant. It is often used for reforestation in arid soils.

Fruit. White flowers (5 mm across) have both male and female parts, which are pollinated by insects. Small brown pinwheel-shaped fruits with five lobes appear in autumn and winter. These fruits split open and release 10-20 tiny winged seeds.

Geographic Range. The tree can be found from the coast up to elevations of 6,000 ft on the western slopes of the Andes Mountains in Chile and Peru. It occurs between 32-40° S.

Additional Information.

- The fresh or dried inner bark of the Soap Bark Tree can be used as a soap substitute for cleaning the skin and clothing. It is considered a very gentle and effective cleaner.
- The Soap Bark Tree has a long history of medicinal uses by the Andean people, who used it to treat respiratory problems. The inner bark of the tree contains complex saponins, which were used as an expectorant. Today this internal use is no longer considered safe.
- The saponins of the Soap Bark Tree have also been used to treat dandruff.
- The saponins have also been used as a foaming agent in fire extinguishers.
- The genus *Quillaja* has only three species, all of which are found in South America.
- The wood is used in cabinetry. Scents derived from the tree are used in perfumes and cosmetics.



Photo Credit: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Penarc>



Photo Credit: T. Slotta, ARS Systematic Botany and Mycology Lab

References:

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