

Common Name: **Soapwort**

Genus: *Saponaria*

Species: *officinalis*

Family: Caryophyllaceae

AKA: Soaproot, Bouncing Bet, Latherwort, Fuller's Herb, Bruisewort, Crow Soap, Sweet Betty, Wild Sweet William

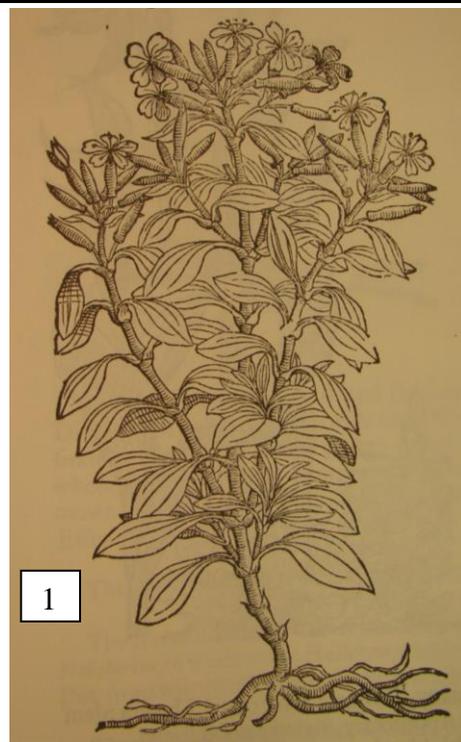


Historical Uses:

Medical: "...The root of which is sharp & ureticall. It helps those which are Liver-sick, and coughes, & ye Orthopnoeae, the quantitie of a spoonefull thereof being taken with hony, and it doth subducere alvum. And being taken with Panaces and the roote of Cappari, it breaks the stones, & makes them to be voided by urine, and it melts the spleen hardned into a Schirrhus, & being subditum, it draws downe menstrua & doth effectually kill the Embrya. Being smeared on with Polenta and Acetum, it takes away the leprosie & it doth dissolve the Panos, being sod with barley meale & wine..." (1)

"...But principally by *Ludouicus Septalius*, *Animaduerf. Med. Lib. 7. Num. 214*. where treating of decoctions in use against the French Poxes, he mentions the singular effect of this herb against that filthy disease. His words are these: I must not in this place omit the use of another Alexipharmacall decoction, being very effectuall and usefull for the poorer sort; namely that which is made of Sope-wort, and herbe common and knowne to all. Moreover, I have sometimes used it with happy successe in the most contumacious disease: but it is of somewhat an ungratefull taste, and therefore it must be referued for the poorer sort..." (2)

"The whole plant is bitter...A decoction of it, applied externally, cures the itch. The Germans make use of it, instead of sarsaparilla, for the cure of venereal disorders. In fact it cures virulent gonorrhoeas, by giving the inspissated juice of it to the amount of half an ounce daily. It is accounted opening and attenuating, and somewhat sudorific, and by some commended against hard tumours and whitlows; but it is seldom used." (3)



“The *strutitus* plant, [which is Soapwort, is used] for inability to urinate, for liver disease and shortness of breath and bad coughs and diarrhea, for bladder stones, for skin irritations, and for bad swellings.” (4)

Household: “Bruised and agitated with water, it raises a lather like soap, which easily washes greasy spots out of clothes...” (5)

Folklore/Astrology: “*Venus* owns this plant.” (6)

Contemporary Uses:

Parts Used: Dried root and leaves

Medicinal:

“A decoction cures the itch. Has proved very useful in jaundice and other visceral obstructions. For old venereal complaints it is a good cure, specially where mercury has failed. It is a tonic, diaphoretic and alterative, a valuable remedy for rheumatism or cutaneous troubles resulting from any form of syphilis. It is also sternutatory. Should be very cautiously used owing to its saponin content.” (7)

“Internally for gout and skin disease, bronchial congestion, and jaundice. Rarely used today, due to its irritant effect on the digestive system...Externally for skin diseases.” (8)

Economic: “Extract is used as an emulsifier in Middle Eastern candy known as *halva*, based on sesame seeds; also in Ukraine to a similar product made from sunflower seeds. Dried herb is used as a soap substitute for delicate materials, and as an ingredient of natural shampoos.” (9)



Soapwort leaves



Close-up of the flowers

Cautions: “...Excess destroys red blood cells and causes paralysis of the vasomotor center...” (10)

“Because of the saponin content, the plant should be used cautiously lest it irritate sensitive tissues.” (11)

Area of Origin: Europe

Physical description:

Rhizomatous perennial with narrowly ovate, pointed leaves, 2”-4” long.

Plant type: Perennial

Height: 12"-36"

Flower color: Pink, cream

Flowering period: June-September

Soil type/requirements: Well-drained, moist, neutral to alkaline soil

Hardiness zone: USDA Hardiness Zone 2-8

Sun requirements: Full sun/partial shade

Propagation: By seed sown in autumn or spring; by division in autumn or spring.

Cautions: Soapwort solutions are an irritant to eyes. May be invasive. Poisonous to fish; roots or foliage should not contact pond water.

Sources:

1. Dioscorides, p. 201
2. Gerard, p. 444
3. Culpepper, p. 162
4. Van Arsdall, p. 134
5. Culpepper, p. 162
6. Ibid
7. Grieve, p. 748
8. Bown, p. 360
9. Ibid
10. Ibid
11. Anderson, p.288

Illustrations/Images:

1. Gerard's Herbal 1633 ed.
2. PSUMG 2013
3. PSUMG 2013