

Saponaria officinalis

[Synonyms : *Lychnis officinalis*, *Lychnis saponaria*, *Saponaria officinalis* var. *glaberrima*, *Silene saponaria*]

SOAPWORT is a perennial. Native to western Asia and to Europe it has small occasionally red-marked, pink or whitish flowers.

It is also known as Boston pink, Bouncing Bess, Bouncing Bet, Bouncing Bet soapweed, Bouncing Bett, Bruisewort, Chimney pink, Common soapwort, Crow soap, Devil-in-a-bush, Dog cloves, Farewell summer, Foam dock, Flop top, Fuller's herb, *Gewöhnliches Seifenkraut* (German), Gill-run-by-the-street, Goodbye summer, Hedge pink, *Herbe à foulon* (French), *Jabonero* (Spanish), Jill-run-by-the-street, Lady-by-the-gate, Latherwort, Londonpride, *Mains jointes* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Mock gillyflower, Monthly pink, *Mydelník* (Czech), *Mydlíca lekárska* (Slovak), *Mydlíce lékařská* (Czech), *Mydlička* (Czech), *Mýdlový kořínek* (Czech), My lady's washbowl, Old maids' pink, Old maid's slipper, Old man's pink, Ragged sailor, *Rohtosuopayrtti* (Finnish), *Såpnejlika* (Swedish), *Saponaire* (French), *Saponaria* (Italian), *Saponario oficina* (Esperanto), Saponary, *Sapún* (Czech), *Savonniere* (French), Scourweed, *Sebonllys* (Welsh), *Seifenkraut* (German), Sheepweed, Soap root, Soapwort gentian, Susie-at-the-gate, Sweet Betty, *Tidig* (Swedish), *Tvålnejlika* (Swedish), *Vanlig såpnejlika* (Swedish), Wild sweet William, Wood phlox, World's wonder, and *Zeepkruid* (Dutch).

The flowers are pollinated by moths especially hawk-moths.

Warning – all parts of the plant can be poisonous if consumed to excess. It is poisonous for animals which tend to avoid it because of the unpleasant taste.

Officinalis means 'of the shop (usually the apothecary's or herbalist's)'. Certain plants used for medicinal purposes, whether of actual or legendary value, were kept readily available and acquired this name.

At least one of its common names Bouncing Bet recognizes its use for laundering as this is a very old name for a washerwoman.

Some authorities say on the one hand that the Romans may well have introduced soapwort to Britain during their occupation of the Country (51 BC-407 AD) while on the other it is suggested that it entered Britain as late as the 16th Century.

Although it has been used in the Middle East to ease skin problems (ranging from eczema and acne to those caused by venereal disease) its reputation lies in its cleansing properties. The name it acquired in England during the 16th Century Elizabethan era Fuller's herb indicates that it was probably being used at that time to clean wool – and it was also believed to have provided an alternative for soap for the begging friars. In the 19th Century at least soapwort provided washing material for wool in France and the Swiss washed their sheep with it before shearing them. Settlers in North America, who introduced the plant there added the bruised leaves to water to provide a lather for washing. The boiled leaves and roots produce a green, soapy sap and this can still be used today by museums in the restoration of valuable and delicate tapestries and brocades although it is gradually being superseded by a synthetic equivalent. It was last used by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London for this purpose only in the 1970s. While in the

Middle East now, especially in Syria, the plant continues to be cultivated as a washing agent, primarily for woollen material.

Although most emphasis in records seems to be placed on the value of soapwort for cleaning, its dried root is also used in the Middle East still today for making a traditional foam or mousse-like accompaniment for pastries (much as cream or ice cream might be used in the West) as an alternative to the inner bark of soap tree (*Quillaja saponaria*).

Several North American tribes came to be familiar with soapwort after its introduction to the Continent. While the Cherokee tribe used it as soap, the Mahuna Indians washed their hair with the juice as a hair tonic. It was also an ingredient in Cherokee poultices applied to boils.

Some records suggest that in the past the plant has been viewed as suitable food for sheep. It was once used to produce a head on beer.

In the light of foregoing references to soapwort's use in human and animal food and drink it is perhaps surprising to note that the plant used to be employed as a fish poison, and it has been implicated in investigations of human and animal poisoning.

Medicinally, soapwort used to be recommended by herbalists for treating rheumatism, gout, liver disorders and jaundice. It was also prescribed as a tonic, applied in poultices to wounds, and used in the treatment of stubborn cases of venereal disease (when mercury had been unsuccessful). It was also used by the Arabs in Medieval times for treating leprosy and various skin ailments. North American settlers used the soapy water made from the leaves and roots to bathe and give some ease from the rashes raised by poison ivy. (Before it can be used medicinally however the plant has to undergo special treatment.) Today it can be used for treating skin diseases.