

*Yucca glauca*

[Synonyms : *Yucca angustifolia*, *Yucca stricta*]

**SOAP WEED** is a succulent evergreen shrub. Native to south-western North America it has large scented, sometimes brown-tinged, greenish-white flowers.

It is also known as Adam's needle, Amole, Bear grass, *Chakida-kahtsu* (Dakota North American Indian), Dagger weed, *Duwaduwa-hi* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), Dwarf yucca, *Hapsijukka* (Finnish), *Hotsanna* (Zuni North American Indian), *Hupestula* (Dakota North American Indian), Indian cabbage, *Juka sivá* (Czech), Palmilla, *Palmililja* (Swedish), Small soapweed, and Spanish bayonet.

The flowers are particularly fragrant at night and are pollinated by the Pronuba moth whose own life cycle is dependent upon soap weed.

Warning – if it is taken internally to excess it can cause diarrhoea.

*Glauca* is derived from Latin *glaucus* (bluish-grey, greenish-grey) meaning 'covered with a fine, powdery whitish coating'.

Soap weed seems to have been especially popular among many North American Indian tribes as a source of soap and shampoo (the root and stem juice produce a cleansing lather). The Isleta, Apache, some of the Dakota, the Zuni, Kiowa, Navajo, Blackfoot, some of the Keresan and the Tewa Indians all used it primarily for washing their clothes, and apart possibly from the Apache and Tewa tribes they and the Cheyenne, Omaha, some of the Tohono O'Odham, the Ponca and the Pawnee Indians all used it as a hair wash too – one which was thought by many to encourage growth. Cheyenne and Kiowa Indians also believed this shampoo would counter dandruff.

This shrub was also collected widely for leaf fibre. It was popular with many tribes including the Tewa, some of the Navajo, Keresan, Tohono O'Odham and Apache, as well as the Zuni and Isleta Indians for making a wide range of cordage ranging through rope, cord or string to the Apache's moccasin ties. The sharp leaf tips provided needles for the Pawnee, Dakota, Ponca and Omaha Indians – and with these leaftips still attached they also produced sewing thread from the leaf fibres. The Zuni tribe plaited split leaves to make little mats which were used for instance as water-carrying head pads. The split leaves also provided the Isleta, some of the Keresan, the Zuni, Tewa and Hopi Indian tribes with material for small brushes used either for cleaning small articles or as decoration on for example pottery or masks. Split leaves were in demand too among some of the Keresan, Tohono O'Odham and Apache tribes, and also the Tewa and Isleta, for basketry.

The boiled root was used in tanning hides by Dakota Indians – and they also made up leaf bundles for fuel. The leaves' uses were not confined to practical ends however as both the Navajo Indians and some of the Apache tribe used them as counters in various games.

Soap weed juice was an ingredient in an arrow poison applied by some of the Navajo Indian tribe. They also used the juice for dyeing. Alone it gave them a red dye – and mixed with yellow soil it provided them with a black one.

The shrub's versatility was recognized by some Indian tribes such as the Navajo and some of the Tewa by its inclusion in ceremonial ritual.

The fruit were a source of raw, boiled, baked or roasted food for many tribes including the Isleta, Tewa, some of the Keresan, the Zuni, some of the Navajo and some of the Apache.

At least four of the tribes (some of the Apache and Keresan, and the Navajo Indians and the Isleta) are known to have dried and stored the fruit for future use. The Kiowa tribe harvested the flower spike that they prepared like cabbage. Flower buds and open flowers were enjoyed raw or cooked by some of the Dakota and Navajo tribes, and the Apache Indians. The Apache also ate raw, boiled or roasted stalks as a vegetable – and some of the Keresan made a beverage from cakes of dried fruit.

Several Indian tribes employed soap weed in veterinary medicine. Both the Blackfoot and some of the Dakota Indians used it for their horses (the former on saddle sores).

Soap weed was a source of medicines for several North American Indian tribes not least the Pawnee, some of the Keresan and the Omaha. Pregnant women in several tribes including some of the Navajo are said to have eaten the fruit to ease childbirth. On the other hand the roots offered some of the Dakota Indians an ingredient for a potion taken for abortion. The shrub provided a remedy for stomach upsets in some of the Dakota tribe, and the Navajo Indians used it as both a laxative and stimulant. The Kiowa believed that the root could heal skin irritation, Cheyenne Indians applied it to various skin disorders, and the Blackfoot used it on wounds.

As food the petals were added to salads, and the young stems, flowers and seed pods (without the seeds) have also been eaten.

Deer are said to enjoy the fruit.

The flower is a state emblem of New Mexico in the United States and was adopted there in 1927.

It was introduced to Britain in 1813.