



Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

Jaboncillo in bloom, Roma, TX, Mother's Day 2004.

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Sapindus saponaria*
ssp. *drummondii*

Common Names: Jaboncillo, Soapberry
Family: Sapindaceae

Jaboncillo Has Multiple Uses

You can read plenty about Soapberry, but around Harlingen, TX, you'll find few of them.

Soapberry is *Sapindus saponaria*, a tree which occurs through most of Texas. It was nominated as Texas' State Tree, but lost. Joe Ideker was especially fond of Soapberry.

Several soapberry trees have been planted at Harlingen's Hugh Ramsey Nature Park, though they're still saplings. Some of these were transplanted by RGV Master Naturalist volunteers from Bill MacWhorter's yard in Weslaco. Others were transplanted by Billy Snider, Jr.

To see an adult Soapberry in Harlingen, you might watch for clusters of the yellow blooms or marble-sized fruit along Tyler St. Several large trees grow in a residential yard a few blocks west of the railroad tracks. An enormous specimen was blooming on May 24, 2004,



on Harlingen's 1st street near C. B. Wood Park.

Years ago, Soapberry was invaluable to humans. The tree's fruit was used for soap, thus the name Jaboncillo. The marble-like fruit was also used to stun fish in the days before fancy fishing rods and tackle were available to hungry folks.

Large and beautiful Jaboncillos grow at Anzalduas Park. Many also provide shade in yards of older homes along the highway west of Mission. Mike Heep has fond memories of drinking beer with "the guys" beneath a soapberry tree in Parras, Mexico.

In a neatly-kept riverside park in downtown Roma, you'll find ornate wrought iron benches from which to view nearby Soapberry trees. There's a high concrete viewing platform in Roma to gaze across the Rio Grande into Mexico. On a Mother's Day family outing, we enjoyed a stop there. Children were swimming in the river and a large Hampshire pig was meandering along the riverbank. The Mexican park across from us was clean and beautifully green. I suppose grass is

truly greener on the other side. The public park on the Mexican side of the river looked more inviting than where we stood observing it. On the steep banks below our vantage point, the U.S. side of the riverbank grew a weedy crop of guinea grass and not much else.

In the wild, Jaboncillo occurs along streams and woodland edges.

It looks a bit like the Chinaberry tree, which has been propagated in this country for many years. Another common name for Jaboncillo is Wild Chinatree.

The fruit of Jaboncillo matures to the size, shape and hardness of a marble. For that reason, I recommend planting them away from sidewalks. The tree is also a poor choice for schoolyards, as the berries contain toxic saponins. In some individuals, including myself, saponins may cause a severe skin rash.

In Mexico, the berries are still used sometimes for laundry soap and to stupefy fish. To make the soap, mashed fruits are stirred in water to create lather. On wool, the fruits yield a bright yellow dye. This leads me to wonder how much of the previously-white laundry comes out looking yellow.

The tree has been cultivated since 1900, and was used for ornamentation or in “shelter-belt plantings.”

The extremely hard seed is sometimes difficult to germinate and a variety of methods are used to speed up germination. These include treatment with sulfuric acid.

Some years ago, local plant grower/landscaper Frank Gonzales demonstrated scarifying the seed by nicking the slick, dry surface with a pocketknife. One of his observers discovered an acute sensitivity to saponins. Her eyes began tearing and burning and the area around her eyes began to swell. Since that time, I’ve avoided handling Soapberry fruit. If I tried Frank’s scarification method, I’d likely slice up my hand even before I started to cry. A safer method for the less-dexterous person is to rub the seed-coat on sandpaper or a concrete sidewalk.

As with most poisonous plants, there are also medicinal uses for *Jaboncillo*. The fruit is used medicinally for renal disorders, rheumatism and fevers.

Buttons and necklaces are made from the seeds.

Other fruits from the Soapberry family include the delicious Lychee and Rambutan. The Golden Raintree, which sprouts prolifically throughout South Texas’ urban neighborhoods, is a related exotic tree of similar appearance. Several native vines are also of the family Sapindaceae. These include Common Balloon Vine, *Serjania* and *Urvillea*. These three vines are host plants for various butterflies, as well as excellent nectar sources.

Technical assistance by Mike Heep, native plant nurseryman and UTPA Instructor. Mrs. Mild holds a Masters degree in Biological Sciences. She may be contacted at RioDeltaWild@aol.com.

website: www.riodeltawild.com