

Soopolallie (*Shepherdia canadensis*)

Other names: Soapberry, Canada buffaloberry, Russet buffaloberry.

Background

Soopolallie is a shrub in the Oleaster family (*Elaeagnaceae*). Other BC plants in this family include the wolf-willow and the naturalized Russian olive. The name 'soopolallie' is from the Chinook language for soap (*soop*) and berry (*olallie*) (Parish et al 1996).

Plant Morphology

Soopolallie is a deciduous shrub 1-2 metres tall with brownish branches that are covered with small brownish-orange scabs. The young branches are covered with many rusty spots, as are the undersides of the leaves. The leaves (sparsely distributed along the branches) are opposite and oval with dark green upper surfaces and silvery-whitish hairs on the under surfaces. The yellowish-brown inconspicuous flowers are borne in clusters on stems, before the leaves open. Male and female flowers are produced on separate plants. The fruits are small, soft, bright red berries that are oval and somewhat translucent. They are juicy and edible but extremely bitter and soapy to touch (Parish et al 1996).

Ecology

In British Columbia, the soopolallie is widespread and very common at low to subalpine elevations in dry to moist open forests, openings and clearings (Parish et al 1996). It is a transcontinental shrub that occurs sporadically in the Pacific region (not at all on the Queen Charlotte Islands) with its occurrence increasing with increasing continentality. It is commonly associated with pinegrass (*Calamagrostis rubescens*), twinflower (*Linnaea borealis*), and falsebox (*Paxistima myrsinites*). Soopolallie has a symbiotic relationship with nitrogen-fixing organisms (Klinka et al 1989). Often, the soopolallie is found on gravelly, shallow soils (Hebda 1995).

Figure1 shows the biogeoclimatic zones and subzones that *Shepherdia canadensis* can be found in the southern interior of BC (Province of BC – Ministry of Forests 1983).

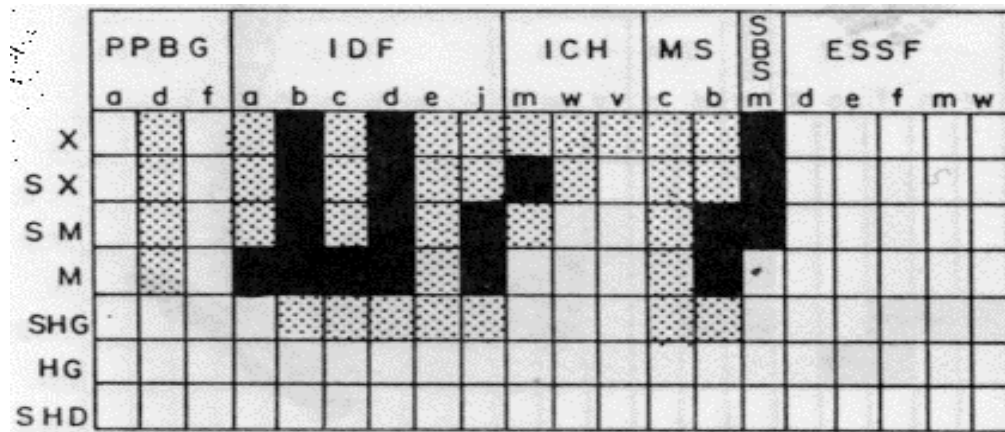


Figure 1. The darkened areas indicate where the plant is more common and abundant; the dotted areas indicate where the plant has limited distribution and abundance.

Food

Soopolallie was widely used as food by coastal and interior First Peoples of British Columbia (Hebda 1995). Like many interior peoples, the Thompson people used large quantities of these fruits, not eaten whole, but whipped into a salmon-coloured froth now called “Indian Ice-cream” (Turner et al 1990). The Thompson people usually gathered these berries in late July. They were not hand picked as the berries are too small and soft, but were harvested by holding the end of a berry-laden branch in one hand and hitting the taut branch with a stick causing the small, soft berries to fall onto a clean mat that was placed beneath. The berries were eaten fresh, dried for later use or boiled into a syrup and then dried as a cake (Turner et al 1990).

The berries are an excellent source of vitamin C and iron.

Medicine

Soopolallie was also known for its medicinal properties. The berries have been used to treat the flu and indigestion, and as a tea, for relieving constipation. The juice was said to be good for acne, boils, digestive problems and gallstones. A tea made from the bark was used to treat eye troubles, and the twigs boiled to make a laxative tea (Kershaw 2000). A boiled decoction of twigs when cooled was used to treat dandruff by the Thompson people (Turner et al 1990).

Warning

Soopolallie berries contain a bitter, soapy substance called saponin that can cause diarrhea, vomiting and cramps if taken in large quantities (Kershaw 2000).

Commercial Production

Soopolallie shrubs can be purchased through specialist nurseries or can be propagated from summer cuttings. It does well in a low-care garden situation planted in shallow, coarse, well-drained soils. It is necessary to have male and female plants to produce berries (Hebda 1995).

Other Uses

The soapy berries were crushed or boiled and used as soap (Kershaw 2000). The Thompson people used to use it as an internal and external cleanser. The hunters would boil a decoction of the berries and drink it and cleanse themselves and their gear to bring them luck in hunting and fishing (Turner et al 1990).

Soopolallie berries were, and continue to be, a valued item of trade among Native people; they are especially valued as gifts (Parish et al 1996).

References

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