

Going Nuts Over Soap Nuts

The world is going green and numerous campaigns are aiming at promoting the use of environmentally friendly and biodegradable materials for our daily needs. A lot is being spoken about soap nuts. Unlike the name suggests, soap nuts are neither soap nor nuts. They are closer to being berries whose shells are useful to us and are sometimes referred to as soap berries.

What are soap nuts?

A soap nut is the common term for fruit of the Sapindus/ Ritha tree which grows well in warm, clement and sultry regions. Soap nuts are widely grown in India, Nepal and other South Asian countries. Sapindus trifoliatius and Sapindus mukorossi are the two most common varieties of soap nuts, the former being small in size and the latter the more commonly used and larger sized variety.

A soap nut is a tiny fruit which feels waxy to the touch and is covered by a solid outer casing. It is this hard outer shell that is most sought after and is used in the various soap nut products that are now gaining popularity. The soap nuts ripen like any other fruit and fall from the trees. They are then collected by the harvesters and the outer shells are removed and separated from the fruit inside. The shell of the soap nuts are then dried in a natural manner by placing them under the sun, thereby eliminating the need to use any harmful chemicals.

The unique ingredient of a soap nut shell that makes it very useful is what are called saponins. Soap nuts hold 12% saponins which are used in many commercial detergents and have natural detergent properties. These saponins are released when the soap nut shells come into contact with water and are, therefore, a great alternative to commonly used washing powders and chemical detergents. They are especially used in washing garments made of wool and silk due to the delicate nature of the fabrics. They are an all natural and environmentally friendly means of washing clothes, and do not damage clothes, as they contain no harmful chemicals.

Some other uses of soap Nuts

Soap nuts are also used in the preparation of soaps, shampoos, lotions, skin cleansing creams, products for pets and in ayurvedic medicine preparations. Sapindus mukorossi, the larger variety of soap nuts, is a part of many medical ayurvedic formulations and featured in the list of herbs and minerals used in Ayurveda. They can be used in the treatment of extreme salivation in pets, epilepsy, migraines, psoriasis, getting rid of freckles, eczema and chlorosis. Soap nuts are also used as emetics, contraceptives and expectorants. In addition, soap nuts are an excellent way to get rid of lice that may be present in the scalp due to their insecticidal properties. Soap nuts also have anti-microbial properties that make them invaluable for greywater and septic systems. It is common to find jewelers in Indonesia and India who use soap nuts as a means to remove tarnish from precious metals such as silver.

Some advantages of using soap nuts are:

Soap nuts are a biodegradable and renewable resources that can be added to your compost once you are done using them.

Soap nuts do not cause any allergies, making them safe for pets and even babies. They are especially great for people with allergies such as dermatitis and other skin irritations that occur due to the chemicals used in detergents and laundry powders. Clothes washed using soap nuts do not cause any irritation or allergies to the skin.

Soap nuts do not contain chemicals or bleaches which translates to retention of colors on your fabrics and therefore no fading of colors on clothes.

Soap nuts are a good option from a financial point of view. They are cheaper than other detergent brands that you commonly use. Nearly 400 loads of clothes can be washed using a kilo of soap nuts, thereby saving you 20 to 50% of your laundry costs. Also, a rinse cycle is not necessary with soap nuts. This helps reduce your water consumption and save on your utilities bill.

There is no need to use fabric softeners when laundry is done using soap nuts, cutting costs even more.

About the Author

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