



**Common Name:** SOAPBERRY

**Scientific Name:** *Sapindus marginatus* Willdenow

**Other Commonly Used Names:** Florida soapberry

**Previously Used Scientific Names:** *Sapindus saponaria* Linnaeus

**Family:** Sapindaceae (soapberry)

**Rarity Ranks:** G5/S1

**State Legal Status:** Rare

**Federal Legal Status:** none

**Federal Wetland Status:** none

**Description:** Small **tree** or large shrub usually less than 30 feet (10 meters) tall. **Bark** pale gray or brown, ridged, and warty. **Leaves** up to 1 foot (32 cm) long (including leaf stalk), alternate, with 6 - 13 leaflets; **leaf stalk** *without wings* between the leaflets. **Leaflets** 2 - 6 inches (5 - 15

cm) long and  $\frac{3}{4}$  -  $2\frac{3}{4}$  inches (2 - 7 cm) wide, lance-shaped with pointed tips, with no teeth along the edges; leaflets may be opposite or alternate along the stalk; leaves fall in the early spring.

**Flower clusters** up to 7 inches (18 cm) long, with both female and male flowers. **Flowers** tiny, bell-shaped, with 5 pale yellow petals and 8 stamens. **Fruits** about  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches (2 cm) long, oval but lopsided, golden-brown, leathery, wrinkled, and hard, with a large, black, poisonous **seed**.

**Similar Species:** Tropical soapberry (*Sapindus saponaria*) is not native to Georgia, but may escape from cultivation. It has narrow wings on the leaf stalk between the leaflets; the leaflets have blunt or rounded tips, and its fruits are round. Some botanists consider Florida soapberry to be the same species as tropical soapberry.

**Related Rare Species:** None in Georgia.

**Habitat:** Coastal shell mounds and hardwood hammocks, often near edges of salt marsh, with live oak, red cedar, red bay, pignut hickory, and yaupon.

**Life History:** Soapberry reproduces sexually. Its flowers are usually unisexual, though some may be bisexual. Individual trees usually produce both female and male flowers, but there is a tendency for flowers of one sex to dominate, making the tree functionally female or male. Although nothing is reported about pollination for soapberry, most species of *Sapindus* are heavy nectar producers and are frequently visited by butterflies and bees. The common name “soapberry” refers to the fruits which contain a natural detergent called saponin and produce lather when crushed; the lather is a skin-irritant for some people.

**Survey Recommendations:** Surveys are best conducted during flowering (summer–early fall) but leaves are distinctive throughout the year except for a brief time in early spring.

**Range:** Georgia, Florida, and possibly South Carolina.

**Threats:** Clearing and development of coastal hammocks.

**Georgia Conservation Status:** Five populations are known, all on state or private conservation land.

**Conservation and Management Recommendations:** Protect coastal hammocks from clearcutting and development. Florida soapberry is probably killed by fire.

#### **Selected References:**

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**Date Compiled or Updated:**

L.Chafin, Aug. 2008: original account

D.Weiler, Feb. 2010: added pictures

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