For a unique and aromatic evening show, find a flowering soap plant
by Len Lindstrand III
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Each late spring and early summer, our valley and foothills become the stage for an unusual evening flower show, reminding us that, while the hot months have arrived, there are still plenty of blooming plants to enjoy in our surrounding wildlands. This flower show comes from soap plant, a somewhat inconspicuous native species with a unique ecology and rich history of utility and medicinal uses.

Soap plant, Chlorogalum pomeridianum var. pomeridianum, is a perennial bulb in the Agavaceae, or century plant, family. The species name, pomeridianum, means “opening in the afternoon.” Also called wavyleaf soap plant or amole, this species occurs from southwestern Oregon and northwestern California to the central and southern California Coast Ranges, in the Sierra Nevada, and throughout the Central Valley. Soap plant grows at elevations below 5,000 feet and is widespread in grassland, chaparral, and foothill woodland habitats. Besides wavyleaf soap plant, there are nine other species of soap plant in California; one of those species, narrow-leaved soap plant, also occurs locally in grasslands and woodlands.

Soap plant is another one of those native plants that provides all-season interest by exhibiting several attributes throughout the year. The plant starts from a deep-seated bulb covered with many coarse fibers. Following the first fall and winter rains, soap plant starts its annual cycle by developing a rosette of wavy blue-green leaves that grow up to 2 feet long. These

Soap plant has a delicate, showy, aromatic white flower that opens during the early evening. Photo by Len Lindstrand III.
leaves lie against the ground and are very noticeable in the winter and early spring months. During late spring and early summer, the leaves start to wither while the plant sends up a 2- to 6-foot tall central stalk. This long stalk is also blue-green and covered with many flower buds growing in rows along branchlets in an arrangement called a panicle. When ready to flower, one row of buds, starting from the bottom of the panicle, opens each early evening. The buds open into a delicate, showy, aromatic white flower with narrow petals and long stamens. The flowers twist closed later in the evening and never open again. Each day another row opens, and then wrings itself closed forever, until every row of flowers on the panicle has taken a turn. The flowers are a food source for native bees and other insects, including night-flying moths, that visit and pollinate the plant.

One can literally see the soap plant flowers “pop” open. If you’re there at the right time, you will see that the flower seems to quiver for a few minutes and then suddenly burst open. My wife and I have long enjoyed our soap plants’ evening show. One year we noticed that some native bumble bees also figured out the flowering routine, and every evening we would watch as, within a minute or so after the flowers opened, the bees would immediately arrive and start gathering some evening nectar.

Soap plant provided many uses for Native Americans and early settlers. The bulb was baked for food and young shoots proved to be sweet when cooked slowly in a pit oven. Young, fresh green leaves were sometimes eaten raw, and the older leaves served to wrap acorn bread during baking. The coarse fibers surrounding the bulb were used to make

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brushes, and the crushed bulb made a glue-like substance used for fletching arrows, putting backings on bows, and making brush handles. The crushed bulb also made a lather used as a soap and shampoo.

Another interesting and unusual use was in helping to catch fish. Lather or crushed bulbs placed into low-flowing streams would stun fish by clogging their gills so that they could not breathe. The fish would then float to the surface and could easily be gathered by hand. Medicinal uses included applying the mashed bulb to relieve sores and poison oak rash, and to cure rheumatic pains and cramps. Finally, juice from the leaves made a type of tattoo ink, producing a green color.

Soap plant makes a great addition to home landscapes. It grows well in full sun to partial shade, is adaptable to many different soil types and, of course, is drought tolerant. The plant serves as a perfect companion to many native shrubs and grows well among oaks. It is easy to cultivate and, once established, may multiply into a small colony. Soap plant is a unique native species worthy of a place in your landscape. Look for them while on your next outing or, better yet, plant one in your yard. Either way, if you see one, take a minute to stop and enjoy the evening flower show—the bees certainly do.

During late spring and early summer soap plant sends up a 2- to 6-foot tall central stalk covered with flower buds growing in rows along branchlets. Photo by Len Lindstrand III.