

Plant of Many Names

By Tom McDonald, Smiling Dog Landscapes

Goat nut, coffeeberry or quinine plant, a jojoba by any other name is still a jojoba, but its colorful nicknames describe different aspects of this desert shrub. Goats eat the nuts, humans have used it as coffee, and its medicinal properties give it a bitter taste like quinine. The name jojoba originated with the O'odham people of the Sonoran desert; its scientific name is *simmondsia chinensis*.

Drought tolerant, surviving on as little as 8 inches of annual rainfall, the jojoba is found at elevations of 1,000 to 3,000 feet. This bushy plant can grow to a height of 7 feet and has green / grayish leaves. Take a close look and you'll notice the leaves stand vertically, exposing the edges of the leaf to the sun rather than the flat surface. This orientation, along with its thicker, waxy cuticle, protects the jojoba from excessive water evaporation.

Jojobas are either male or female and can bloom December through July. The male forms clusters of small flowers compared to the larger, single blooms of the female. Only the female produces an acorn-like nut. To bear fruit, it takes a ratio of four males to every female.

The jojoba is credited for saving the lives of many sperm whales when it was discovered that jojoba oil is, in many ways, superior to whale oil. Having a longer shelf life than most other vegetable oils, it closely resembles waxes produced by human skin, making it a favorite of the cosmetic industry and is found in shampoos, skin creams, and many other skin care products. Recently, jojoba oil has been the subject of extensive research by the fuel industry, finding it produces more energy and fewer pollutants than fossil fuels. Unfortunately at over a \$100 a gallon, it may be a while before jojoba oil catches on as a fuel.

Native Americans were already using the jojoba in a variety of ways when Jesuit missionaries first visited the southwest. The Natives heated the nuts then ground the softened seeds to make a buttery paste which they applied to the skin or hair as a conditioner. The paste also has natural fungicidal properties and was used as a healing salve for burns. Pregnant women ingested the nuts to aid in childbirth, and warriors and hunters ate them to ward off hunger while on the trail. Beware though, the oil contained in the nut can act as a powerful laxative so it's wise not to consume too many. Some folks roast the nuts to make a coffee substitute. I have tried this with disastrous results to both my coffee pot and palate! I think it must be an acquired taste. Roasting the nuts with a little spray of olive oil and sea salt, however, produces a tasty snack.

As a landscape plant, the jojoba is a fitting addition to your Sonoran desert scape -- low maintenance and a thrifty water user. While not a colorful shrub, if you prefer your bushes to be 'meatballed' (trimmed into tight geometric shapes), you'll be pleased to learn that the jojoba lends itself well to this practice.