

Nature's gifts



Highly flammable and invasive French broom



Native Soaproot lily

Photos Toris Jaeger

By Toris Jaeger, Naturalist

Every day I am aware of the gifts from nature – sunlight, air, water, flora and fauna. The sun is a very powerful energy source. It gives energy to all living things, and we can use sunlight to reduce pollution from fossil fuels.

Fauna, including microorganisms, fungi, and animals such as tiny bees, people, and great blue whales are part of the tapestry of life. Flora, including algae, grass and redwood trees, capture power from the sun and are the foundation of Earth's food web.



Deer nibbling Soaproot leaves

Now that it is spring and daffodil time in our area, be on the lookout for plants that were important to Native Peoples. In the Orinda Nature Area soaproot lily is beginning to flower. Look for the tall thin stems with delicate white flowers growing in

meadows and on grassy hills.

Many local tribes collected these useful plants and shaped their coarse brown fibers covering the bulbs into small brushes. The first people of our area pounded the bulbs to make a soapy juice. The liquid contains saponins that form a lather when mixed with water. The lather can be used for washing hair, thus giving rise to the name “soaproot.” The observant people discovered that the soapy liquid used for washing stunned the fish in the stream nearby causing them to float to the surface where they could be collected for food. Roasting the bulbs broke down the saponins, and the local Miwok people ate the bulbs for winter food. This useful plant grows at the edge of the meadow in the Nature Area and can be spotted as you hike the trails of the region. At sunrise and sunset, you might see deer eating the lily leaves!

I would like you to help me spread the word about a common shrub in our area. This month the hills are bright with the yellow flowers of French broom. It is easy to spot the large patches of yellow spreading through neighborhoods. Every year, hundreds of volunteers in the region's parks work diligently to remove this invasive weed.

Many residents do not know that this pretty bush is highly flammable; sometimes it is called “fireman's nightmare.” The seeds and leaves are poisonous to wildlife and the shrub crowds out other plants. If you find it in your yard, please remove it – you will be doing your neighbors and wildlife a favor by getting rid of a toxic fire hazard. For many years, I have led groups of volunteers in the Nature Area in pulling up French broom and other invasive plants.

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