

SOLOMON'S SEAL: CULTIVATION & FOLKLORE

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Solomon's Seal (*polygonatum biflorum, multiflorum, odoratum*, etc.) is a medicinal herb that has diverse health restorative properties. It can be used as a herbal tincture, salve, tea or supplement. As an alternative remedy, it may offer relief, healing or mending to sports injuries and other conditions related to tendons, joints, ligaments, bones, bruises, connecting tissues, cartilage, etc. It also soothes and repairs gastrointestinal inflammation and injuries. It is effective for feminine issues, such as menstrual cramps, PMS, bleeding, and the like. Additionally, it is known to lower blood pressure and relieve dry coughs.

Solomon's Seal has a rich history that goes back many thousands of years. Herbalists and healers, both in Europe and North America and the Far East, have written about its diverse effects on numerous conditions. In 2010, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Natural Resources Conservation Service) identified Solomon's Seal as a ***Culturally Significant Plant***, noting its medicinal and restorative value among North American Tribal (Original Nation) peoples. It is our understanding that the National Institutes of Health is presently researching the benefits of Solomon's Seal for heart health.

Western documentation is largely anecdotal. Gardener's and nature lovers know the plant well, for it is easily identifiable and can be cultivated. Wellness practitioners using alternative healing methods are somewhat familiar with the plant and praise it; however, their number is still small and documentation is limited. Herbalists, chiropractors, among others are increasingly validating Solomon's Seal's effectiveness. Traditional Western medicine, based on allopathic or invasive procedures and pharmaceuticals, has provided little knowledge or interest in integrating Solomon's Seal with treatment. However, researchers are engaging in projects to determine the herb's healing qualities for a number of conditions.

Below you will learn about the plant's botanical characteristics, selected folklore and history, and cultivation information if you are inclined to introduce it in your own yard.

BOTANICAL CHARACTERISTICS



Solomon's Seal

Polygonatum biflorum

Family: Ruscaceae; Liliaceae (lily)

Genus: Polygonatum

Species: biflorum

Synonym: *Polygonatum canaliculatum*; *Polygonatum commutatum*; *Polygonatum giganteum*; *Polygonatum odoratum*; *Polygonatum officinale*, and more!!

Other common names: Fragrant Solomon's Seal, Lady's Seals, Saint Mary's Seal, Sealwort, Sigillum Sanctae Mariae, Yu Zhu, Angular Solomon's Seal, True Solomon's Seal, Dropberry, Sealroot, American Solomon's Seal, King Solomon's Seal, King Solomon's-seal, Small Solomon's Seal, Sow's Teats, Dropberry, He Shou Wu, Mahmeda, Meda

Category:

Perennials

Height:

12-18 in. (30-45 cm)
18-24 in. (45-60 cm)
24-36 in. (60-90 cm)
36-48 in. (90-120 cm)

Sun Exposure:

Sun to Partial Shade
Light Shade, woodland

Bloom Color:

Pale Yellow
Chartreuse (Yellow-Green)
White/Near White

Bloom Time:

Mid Spring
Late Spring/Early Summer

Foliage:

Grown for foliage
Herbaceous
Smooth-Textured

Other details:

Average Water Needs; Water regularly; do not over-water

Soil pH requirements:

Unknown

Propagation Methods:

By dividing rhizomes, tubers, corms or bulbs (including offsets)

Seed Collecting:

Bag seed-heads to capture ripening seed

Hardiness:

USDA Zone 3a: to -39°C (-40°F)
USDA Zone 3b: to -37.2°C (-35°F)
USDA Zone 4a: to -34.4°C (-30°F)
USDA Zone 4b: to -31.6°C (-25°F)
USDA Zone 5a: to -28.8°C (-20°F)
USDA Zone 5b: to -26.1°C (-15°F)
USDA Zone 6a: to -23.3°C (-10°F)
USDA Zone 6b: to -20.5°C (-5°F)
USDA Zone 7a: to -17.7°C (0°F)
USDA Zone 7b: to -14.9°C (5°F)
USDA Zone 8a: to -12.2°C (10°F)
USDA Zone 8b: to -9.4°C (15°F)
USDA Zone 9a: to -6.6°C (20°F)
USDA Zone 9b: to -3.8°C (25°F)

General Characteristics

Solomon's Seal is a close relative of the *Lily of the Valley* and was formerly assigned to the same genus (*Convallaria*, but now *Liliaceae*), with several similar species that are native to North America, northern Europe and Siberia, and cultivated as popular garden ornamentals. The hardy perennial has stems of three feet in height that finally curve gracefully and bear pale green, oval leaves and drooping clusters of creamy white flowers, followed by blue-black berries. It thrives in light, well drained, moist, humus-rich soil in partial shade or in sun (preferring forests) with a cool root run.

Solomon's Seal is a lovely woodland perennial with native varieties in North America, Asia and Europe. It is native to most of the eastern and midwestern United States. It can grow up to two feet tall. Unfortunately, some areas may consider the plant invasive and obnoxious.

Solomon's Seal prefers a light soil, good mulch and a shady location. It can be grown by division or by seed. It will return year after year and spread itself. It is a lovely, delicate addition to a shade garden.

The Flowers & Leaves

The plant consists of a single stem with many broad, ovate leaves with parallel veination arranged alternately along the length of it and clasping the base. The plant often grows in a slight arc and the flowers dangle from the leaf axils beneath the arc of the stem. (This gives the plant its folk name "sow's teats"). The large and broadly-oval leaves grow alternately on the stem, practically clasping it by the bases. All the leaves have the character of turning one way, being bent slightly upward, as well as to one side, and have very marked longitudinal ribbing on their surfaces.



The flowers are in little drooping clusters of from two to seven, springing from the axils of the leaves, but hanging in an opposite direction to the foliage. They are tubular in shape, of a creamy or waxy white, topped with a yellowish-green, and sweet-scented, and are succeeded by small berries about the size of a pea, of a blackish-blue colour, varying to purple and red, and containing about three or four seeds.

The Root (Rhizome)

The generic name *Polygonatum* signifies many-angled, and is supposed to be derived either from the numerous knots or swellings of the root or from the numerous nodes or joints of the stem, but the characteristics are not very marked ones. The specific name, *multiflorum*, serves to distinguish this many-flowered species from another in which the blossoms are solitary, or only in pairs from each axil.

The creeping rootstock, or underground stem, is thick and white and is lifted in autumn and used in herbal medicine. Because of the creeping rootstock, the plant multiplies very rapidly. The plant's botanical genus, *Polygonatum*, refers to the "many-angled" knots on the root or the numerous joints on the stems. Its English name is believed to refer to the flat, round scars on the rootstocks, resembling the impressions of a seal; and when the root is cut transversely, it resembles Hebrew characters, giving rise to the legend that the wise King Solomon, who knew of the virtues of the roots, set his seal upon them.

You can estimate the plant's age by examining the rhizome. Each year the stem leaves a scar, or "seal" on the rhizome. Counting these will give you an idea of how long your plant has been alive.



NOTE: CULTIVATION TIPS AT END OF ARTICLE

HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE & Culinary Qualities

Solomon's Seal is named for King Solomon of Hebrew lore who was granted great wisdom by the Hebrew God and had a special seal that aided him in his magical workings, allowing him to command demons without coming to harm. According to herbal lore, King Solomon himself placed his seal upon this plant when he recognized its great value. Those with imagination can see the seal on the rootstock in the circular scars left by the stem after it dies back.

Solomon's Seal is a bittersweet, astringent, tonic herb that includes convallarin (also one of the active constituents in Lily of the Valley), asparagin, allantoin, gum, sugar, mucilage, starch and pectin.

Solomon's Seal has been used for centuries to heal wounds, repair damaged tissue, bruises, and knit broken bones; relieve dry coughs and tuberculosis; treat chronic dysentery, diarrhea and hemorrhoids, among other diverse uses, as explained more below.

In A.D. 130-200, the most famous physician of his day, Galen, recommended the use of Solomon's Seal root to remove freckles, spots and marks for a fresh, fair and lovely skin. In the sixteenth century, the herbalist, John Gerard, in his *Herball*, claimed that Solomon's Seal was an effective treatment for cuts, wounds and bruises of all kinds (when used in a poultice). The herbalist also said that when taken internally, the roots were excellent for "broken bones to knit." So enamored by Solomon's Seal's diverse healing qualities, he pronounced: "*Common experience teacheth, that in the world there is not to be found another herbe comparable to it.*"

In his publication, *Theatrum Botanicum*, of 1640, John Parkinson, a renowned British apothecary, noted that Italian women used the root to improve their complexions and retain their beauty and agelessness. In North America, early native tribes made a tea of the rootstock as a cure for women's complaints and general internal pains. In some countries, Solomon's Seal is boiled and eaten as a vegetable similar to asparagus, and it has also been used in snuffs to induce sneezing and relieve head congestion.

The fresh root, pounded and applied topically helps fade bruising. For centuries the powdered roots have been shown to make an excellent poultice for bruises, piles, inflammations and tumours. The bruised roots were much used as a popular cure for black eyes, mixed with cream. The bruised leaves made into a stiff ointment with lard served the same purpose. Today, a salve such as our **Cortesia Deep Penetrating Salve**, would be the ointment of choice.

A decoction can also be used as a facial rinse to help fade blemishes or for poison ivy and similar skin problems. In Galen's time, the distilled water decoction was used as a cosmetic: the diluted water of the whole plant used to the face or other parts of the skin, cleanses it from freckles, spots or any marks, leaving the place fresh, fair and lovely, for which purpose it is much used by the Italian ladies and is the principal ingredient of most of the cosmetics and beauty washes advertised by perfumers at high price.

Solomon's Seal root tea is a good tonic acting on the kidneys, heart and sexual organs as well as soothing the digestive system. An infusion can be used for profuse menstruation and internal bleeding, indigestion and other stomach and digestive complaints including ulcers, bowel problems and hemorrhoids. Used as a mouthwash, it is said to help strengthen gums.

Oil infused with Solomon's Seal root is good to keep on hand for first aid treatment of sprains, strains and broken or bruised bones. (Not to replace, but to enhance traditional medical intervention.) Solomon's Seal root tea or tincture aids in the repair of broken bones and may be drunk after a doctor has set the break. It is also great for torn ligaments, dislocations and other issues with joints.

Culinary Uses (*root & young shoots only!*)

Solomon's Seal seem innocuous and so widely useful, but parts of it are poisonous. Except for the root and tender young shoots, all parts of the adult plant, especially the berries are poisonous and should not be consumed. The berries are stated to excite vomiting, and even the leaves, nausea, if chewed. So, heed this warning:

POISONOUS: Do NOT eat the berries or leaves or stems!

Young shoots harvested in early spring can be prepared and eaten like asparagus. This is a favorite food in Turkey.

The root dug in autumn and dried is also edible. Any roots should be boiled with three changes of water before being roasted and eaten. The roots macerated for some time in water yield a substance capable of being used as food and consisting principally of starch.

If you are unsure about identifying the plants or its parts, seek out a personal consultation with a skilled herbalist or botanist before using internally for food or medicine.

HISTORY & FOLKLORE

"Set me as a seal upon thy heart"

(The Song of Songs which is Solomon's, 8:6)



King Solomon, the son of King David, established Jerusalem as the city of justice and peace. His name reflects the original name of the city, Shalem. Solomon is said to have been given both wisdom and knowledge, this is usually taken to mean wise government, the ability to distinguish morally between good and evil, and a thorough understanding of the universe. "Behold I have given you a wise and understanding heart; there has been none like you before you, nor after you shall any arise like you." (Kings 1, 3, 12).

The legend of King Solomon's Seal, of the wondrous signet ring that he received from heaven, is common to Judaism, to Christianity and to Islam. King Solomon's Seal, whose base is on the ground and whose tip reaches heaven, symbolizes a harmony of opposites, whose significance is manifold as much as it is multi-cultural. It reflects the cosmic order, the skies, the movement of the stars in their spheres, and the perpetual flow between heaven and earth, between the elements of air and fire. The Seal, therefore, symbolizes super-human wisdom and rule by divine grace.

The symbol of the hexagram, the star-like figure formed by two triangles, has many connotations, especially when it is enclosed by a circle; super-natural powers have been attributed to it in many parts of the world since ancient times.



Through geometry, in which the Pythagoreans and their followers saw cosmic symbolism, the hexagram and the pentagram became an expression of heaven and its reflection on earth, the divine and its reflection in creation and of the connection between heaven and earth, between the macrocosm and the microcosm, and between spirit and matter.

King Solomon's Seal combines strength and beauty, symbolism and illustrative quality and all within a geometric figure, the most important characteristic of Islamic art. The Moslem artist's love of geometry allows the true essence of King Solomon's Seal as a symbol of the connection between the two worlds to be expressed; in this context, it symbolizes the link between science, beauty and metaphysics, with elements of medicine and magic, astronomy and astrology, the art of irrigation and its influence on the garden, and the symbolic connection between pleasure gardens and the Garden of Eden, between the sky and architectural domes and on traditional cosmology and its connection to religion.



Today, the hexagram is known as the Star of David and is seen as the definitive symbol of Judaism; the term is even used in Islamic countries. There is a degree of confusion about its origins, name and associations. In Europe, the pentagram is usually known as King Solomon's Seal, while the hexagram is known as the Star of David.

The magic drawings of the hexagram and the pentagram were known as seals, in keeping with the idea that a person "stamps himself" with these signs in order to protect himself from harmful spirits. This term is connected to the legend of King Solomon who controlled the demons by means of a special signet ring on which was engraved the Tetragrammaton. The seal only had power for one thing: to provide protection from malevolent forces.

CULTIVATION

Solomon's Seal is a very hardy plant. It prefers a light soil and a shady situation, being a native of woods. If grown in a suitable soil and place and not crowded by shrubs, it will thrive and multiply very rapidly by the creeping rootstocks. It will be better for occasional liberal dressings of leaf mould, or an annual top dressing of decayed manure in March.

Seeds, sown as soon as gathered in the autumn, germinate in early spring, or the roots may be divided to any extent. The best time to transplant or part the roots is in autumn, after the stalks decay, but it may safely be done at any time, if taken up with plenty of soil, until they begin to shoot in the spring, when the ground should be dug about them and kept clean from weeds. They should also have room to spread and must not be removed more than every third or fourth year.

To give Solomon's Seal a good start when planting, the soil should be well broken up with a fork and have a little mild manure worked in.



You can estimate the plant's age by examining the rhizome. Each year the stem leaves a scar, or "seal" on the rhizome. Counting these will give you an idea of how long your plant has been alive. When harvesting the roots, leave several inches (or 3-4 nodes) of the newest portion untouched so that you don't kill or damage the plant. Always harvest/wildcraft with care and respect for the plant and its surrounding habitat.

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Links to More Information About the Plant Solomon's Seal

<http://www.botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/s/solsea63.html>

http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/woodland/plants/solomon_seal.htm

http://www.ibiblio.org/pfaf/cgi-bin/arr_html?Polygonatum+multiflorum

http://altnature.com/gallery/Solomon's_Seal.htm

http://christopherhobbsmedia.com/database/herb.php?Herb_ID=246

<http://davesgarden.com/guides/pf/go/393/>

<http://plants.usda.gov/java/profile?symbol=POBI2>

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