

Polygonatum biflorum (Solomon's Seal)

Botanical Bytes
By Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 1.5'-3'
Foliage Width: 1.5'-3'
Flower Height: 1.5'-3'
Foliage Color: Green
Flower Color: White
USDA Hardiness: 3-9
Moisture: Average - moist
Light: Part Sun - Shade



Polygonatum biflorum is a common sight on woodland walks. Its gracefully arching stems and delicate bell-shaped flowers always attract my attention. The rhizomes of this wonderful woodland critter have crept over 75% of the North American continent. Ranging northwest into Montana, southwest to New Mexico, northeast to Maine, and southeast into Florida, it is quite well traveled.

Solomon's Seal has over 20 common names, which can create a little confusion. Some of the more interesting include Sealwort, Dropberry, Sow's Teats, and Saint Mary's Seal. Sealwort refers to its healing properties, while Sow's Teats and Dropberry are descriptive of how the flowers and berries hang down below the leaves of the arching stems.

Native American Indians prized this plant for much more than its beauty. The Cherokee, Chippewa, Menominee, Ojibwa, and Rappahannock Indians all used the roots, leaves, and stems of Solomon's Seal for a wide variety of medicinal purposes, ranging from stomach trouble, pain relief, and headaches to treating lung disease.

Polygonatum biflorum was also important in the Native American kitchen. The young stems and leaves were boiled and eaten, while the roots could be beaten into flour, which was used to make bread. Dried roots could be ground up and used as a seasoning and sometimes burned as pleasant-smelling incense.

In the garden Solomon's Seal is a durable, leafy family member that can thrive in shady gardens with average soil and moisture. It can tolerate moist soils if necessary but also can handle short periods of drought once established. The creeping rhizomes are perfect for woodland slopes, allowing the gardeners to enjoy the flowers and fruit easily because they are often partially hidden beneath the leaves.

Birds, butterflies, bumblebees, and hummingbirds all will visit at different times of the year, which is always a bonus. Buggy pests and diseases are not generally a problem with Solomon's Seal.

Solomon's Seal possesses a rich historical heritage spanning hundreds of years. Long before traditional gardeners discovered its beauty, the North American Indians were using it for everyday living and survival. This incredible woodland plant has earned its place in your shady garden. Give it a try and you will not be disappointed.