

The Weekly Plant

11 June 2014

Common names: chaste tree, lilac chaste tree, chasteberry, monk's pepper, hemp tree, Indian spice

Scientific name: *Vitex agnus-castus*¹

TAV location:

Just behind the front wall of town home on lot 227

Discussion

I've been looking for landscape plants to discuss in Weekly Plant and this one's a beauty.

Chaste tree is native to southern Europe and western Asia. A popular landscape plant, it has naturalized (grows without human planting) in southeastern US and is considered by some to be moderately invasive.

Chaste tree can grow into a small tree, up to 25' high and wide. The leaves are palmately compound with 5 or 7 leaflets, opposite, deciduous, green on top, and silvery on the bottom. The leaves may remind you of hemp (marijuana) leaves, hence one of the common names.

This plant's claim to fame, however, is its flowers. Some say it makes them think of lilacs. To my eye, it looks like a giant butterfly bush (*Buddleia davidii*). The fragrant flowers are blue to purple and are on long spikes, up to 12", held above the foliage. Here in Arizona chaste tree begins blooming in about May and continues on into September. The flowers attract bees, butterflies, and even hummingbirds. Flowers are followed by small, round fruit that eventually blackens. This is the one downside of this plant. The fruit is not attractive, especially when the tree has lost its leaves in winter.



Since this is an ornamental, not a wildling, let me share some horticultural information. Though we grow this plant as a tree in Arizona, it can also be pruned and kept as a shrub, though this may delay the start of flowering. In colder areas of the country, this plant grows only as a shrub, dying back to the ground each winter and producing new growth each spring. As either a tree or shrub, this plant is a reliable bloomer because it "flowers on new wood", that is, the flowers are produced as part of the new growth each year. This piece of information also tells you that chaste tree should be pruned when it is dormant, December-March. If you prune after growth starts, you may be pruning off the buds of those lovely flowers.

Grow chaste tree in full sun. Once established, this tree can do well on one deep watering a week in hot weather, twice a month in cooler seasons. One reference warned against overwatering, as this will decrease flowering. If your plant is small, you might try cutting off spent flower spikes (called deadheading) to improve appearance and encourage longer flowering, but this is clearly not practical on larger plants.

Flower color ranges from pale blue to purple and there are white and pink selections. To get the flower color you want, select your plant at the nursery when it is in flower. If you can find a dwarf variety, try it in a large pot.

When I started researching this plant I was surprised when the first hit on Google was an ad by an herbal medicine company. Chaste tree has a long history of use in treating female hormonal problems and being used as an aphrodisiac. This gives rise to the name "chaste tree" and, since the pepper-flavored fruit is used, to the names "monk's pepper" and "chasteberry".



¹ Tropicos is the source of the currently accepted scientific name: <http://www.tropicos.org/>.