

## Vitex agnus-castus (**Vitex**)

For indigo blossoms, butterfly habitat and deer resistance, few plants beat *Vitex*, an adapted bloomer recently added to the Texas Superstar plant program. *Vitex* is also known as Texas Lilac or the Chaste tree. A native of China and India, it naturalized throughout the U.S., as long ago as 1670. For people living in the warmer parts of the South, the 'Lilac Chaste Tree' has been the shrub of choice to mimic the much beloved lilacs that are restricted to cooler regions. It grows best in full sun and in a location that drains well--loves the heat, and is so tough that even the Texas Department of Transportation plants it on highway medians. *Vitex* is a spectacular butterfly-attracting plant, hummingbirds love it, and it's deer-resistant, although bucks will brush their antlers on its branches if the plant is allowed to grow large.

The chaste tree is a small deciduous tree or large shrub with a showy summertime flower display. The leaves are 3-4 in (7.6-10 cm) in diameter and palmately compound with 5 to 7 fingerlike leaflets. Also called sage tree, the foliage is likewise aromatic and is typically grey-green to dark green above and lighter on the undersides. The leaves also bear a striking resemblance to those of the infamous marijuana or hemp (*Cannabis* spp.) plant which provides yet another common name, hemp tree. The chaste tree is a sprawling plant that grows 10-20 ft (3-6 m) and about as wide. Branched flower clusters are produced on new wood in late spring and early summer in a great flush that makes the tree look like a hazy purple cloud. It continues to bloom sporadically until early fall. Not only is the tree strikingly beautiful when in full bloom, but it is also fragrant and attracts pollinating bees and hummingbirds make hungry visits. Flowers are followed by a fleshy fruit that contains four seeds that are sometimes used as seasoning, similar to black pepper (monk's pepper is another of this species' common names). Flower color ranges from violet to blue to deep purple. There is also a white form.



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**Culture** Easy to grow in almost any soil that has good drainage! Even tolerant of salt drift. The chaste tree can take care of itself, but can be pushed to faster growth with light applications of fertilizer in spring and early summer and by mulching around the plant. If pruning is desired to control the size, it should be done in winter, since blooms form on new wood. It is hardly ever disturbed by pests or disease but is susceptible to mushroom root rot and nematodes.

**Light:** Sun to shade.

**Moisture:** Moderate to moist, well drained soil.

**Hardiness:** USDA Zones 6-10. In Zone 6 chaste tree is best planted against a wall for additional protection against extreme cold.

**Propagation:** By seed in the spring and fall or by cuttings which are easy to root in warm weather.

**Usage** The showy chaste tree makes a particularly effective specimen - use it as the centerpiece of a lawn or in large containers. Plant near patio or deck where it can be seen but not too close though as it attracts crowds of hungry bumble bees. It makes a colorful addition to a mixed border if kept pruned to shrub size. Chaste tree looks best unmanaged, so let it sprawl. Leaves have medicinal use, and seeds can be used for seasoning.



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**Ornamental Shrubs *Vitex agnus-castus* and 'Shoal's Creek' cultivar**



<b>Common Name:</b>	Vitex (Chastetree)
<b>Latin Name:</b>	<i>Vitex agnus-castus</i>
<b>Tree Size:</b>	Small
<b>Leaf Type:</b>	Deciduous
<b>Growth Rate:</b>	Rapid
<b>Water Needs:</b>	Moderate
<b>Tolerances:</b>	Drought, alkaline soils (pH > 7.5)
<b>Attributes:</b>	showy or fragrant flower
<b>Features:</b>	Spikes of lavender or white blooms in summer.
<b>Problems:</b>	Needs pruning to develop trunk structure