

Common Name: **Chaste Tree**

Genus: *Vitex*

Species: *agnus-castus*

Family: Verbenaceae

AKA: Agnos, Vitex, Hempe tree, Monk's Pepper



Historical Uses:

Medical: “It hath a warming, binding facultie, but ye fruit of it being dranck, doth help such as are stung with Serpents, the Splenticall, and hydropsicall... The seed being dranck with Pulegium, and being suffumigated, and applied causeth purgation, it doth dissolve head-aches, being applied as a cataplasme and it is gently poured with vinegar and oyle upon the Lethargicall and Phreneticall...”(1)

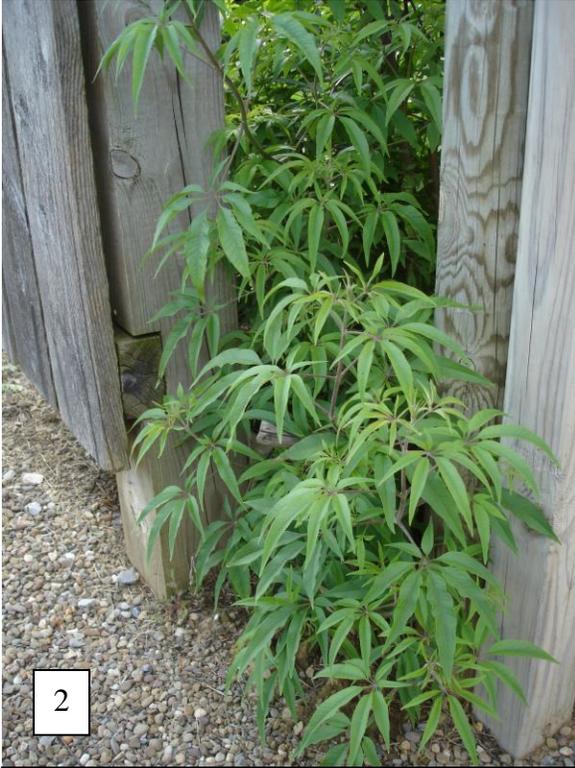
“According to the *Hortus sanitatis*, “the seed, leaves and flowers of this plant when eaten by wicked, unchaste people will make them chaste like lambs.” Moreover, “if you strew the leaves and flowers under the bed, you will have in sleep peace from wicked, un-chaste dreams.” *Banckes's Herbal* adds that the herb will “destroy the dropsy, defy the hardness and stopping of the milt [spleen] and will do away the ache of a man's head that is engendered by wicked humors.”(2)



“*Agnus Castus* is a singular medicine and remedie for such as would willingly live chaste, for it withstandeth all uncleannesse, or desire to the flesh, consuming and drying up the feed of generation, in what sort soever it be taken, whether in pouders onely, or the decoction drunke, or whether the leaves be carried about the body; for which cause it was called *Castus*; that is to say, chaste, cleane, and pure.” (3)

“It suppresses sexual desire, relieves painful swellings of the genitals, reduces sperm, checks gonorrhoea, dissolves boils, helps a dried, hardened spleen, induces sleep, eases headache, remedies dropsy, causes menses, and heals snakebites.” (4)

Culinary: “Its fruits are used as a culinary seasoning.” (5)



Young Chaste Tree takes on the appearance of a bushy shrub

Household: “The twigs are used for basketry, it makes a yellow dye. The leaves, like those of the olive, were burned to repel venomous beasts.” (6)

Folklore/Astrology: “Ground seeds were used in monasteries as a condiment to suppress libido, hence the common names, “monk’s pepper” and “chaste tree”.” (7)

“The seeds were once held in repute for securing chastity, and the Athenian matrons in the sacred rites of *Ceres* used to string their couches with the leaves.” (8)

Contemporary Uses:

Parts Used: The ripe berries

Medicinal: “A pungent, bitter-sweet, slightly astringent, relaxant herb that regulates hormonal functions, promotes lactation, and relieves spasms and pain.

Internally for menstrual and menopausal complaints, infertility, and insufficient lactation. Combines well with *Hydrastis Canadensis* for menopausal problems.” (9)

Culinary: “Fruits are used as a substitute for pepper, and in Middle Eastern spice mixes.” (10)

Cautions: Excess causes nerve disorder known as formication (sensation of insects crawling under the skin).

Area of Origin: Shores of the Mediterranean Sea

Physical description: “Both *V. agnus-castus* and *V. negundo* are fine ornamental shrubs for warm temperate regions or sheltered positions in colder parts. They have elegant, compound leaves, and spikes of mauve flowers.” (11)

“A deciduous shrub of free spreading habit, young shoots covered with a fine grey down; leaves opposite, composed of five to seven radiating leaflets borne on a main stalk 1 to 2-½ inches long, leaflets linear, lance-shaped, toothed, dark green above, grey beneath with a very close felt.” (12)

Plant type: Perennial shrub

Form: Upright, spreading

Height: 6'-25'

Flower color: White, Lavender, Mauve

Flowering period: May-October

Soil type/requirements: Well-drained to poor dry soil in sun.

Fruit: "...The berries somewhat like peppercorns, dark purple, half covered by their sage-green calyces, yellowish within, hard, having an aromatic odor." (13)

Hardiness zone: USDA 7-10

Sun requirements: Full sun

Propagation: By seed sown when ripe or in spring; by semi-ripe cuttings in summer.

SourceS:

1. Dioscorides, p. 73
2. Freeman, p.22
3. Gerard, p. 1388
4. Anderson, p.341
5. Ibid
6. Ibid
7. Bown, p. 164
8. Grieve, p. 188
9. Bown, p. 164
10. Ibid
11. Ibid
12. Grieve, p. 188
13. Ibid

Illustrations/Images:

1. Drach's Herbal 1490-95
2. PSUMG 2006
3. PSUMG 2006



Close-up of the leaves