



Vitex agnus-castus Chastetree¹

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INTRODUCTION

Chastetree can be grown as a large, deciduous, multistemmed shrub or small, 10 to 15 feet tall tree, and is noteworthy for its showy, summer display (late springtime in the deep South) of fragrant, upward-pointing, terminal panicles of lavender blooms which are quite attractive to butterflies and bees (Fig. 1). The tree is often planted where honey is marketed to promote excellent honey production. The trunk is gray and blocky and somewhat ornamental. The sage-scented leaves of Chastetree are shaped liked a hand, or palmate, and were once believed to have sedative effects. *Vitex* has the common name "Chastetree" since Athenian women used the leaves in their beds to keep themselves chaste during the feasts of Ceres. *Vitex* seeds itself into landscaped beds and can become somewhat weedy.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Scientific name: *Vitex agnus-castus*

Pronunciation: VYE-tecks AG-nus-KASE-tus

Common name(s): Chastetree, *Vitex*

Family: *Verbenaceae*

USDA hardiness zones: 7B through 11 (Fig. 2)

Origin: not native to North America

Uses: container or above-ground planter; recommended for buffer strips around parking lots or for median strip plantings in the highway; near a deck or patio; trainable as a standard; specimen; no proven urban tolerance

Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

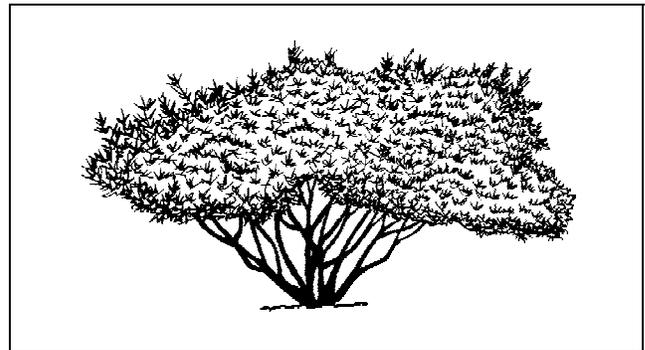


Figure 1. Mature Chastetree.

DESCRIPTION

Height: 10 to 15 feet

Spread: 15 to 20 feet

Crown uniformity: irregular outline or silhouette

Crown shape: round; vase shape

Crown density: moderate

Growth rate: fast

Texture: fine

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: opposite/subopposite (Fig. 3)

Leaf type: palmately compound

Leaflet margin: entire

Leaflet shape: lanceolate

Leaflet venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: deciduous; fragrant

Leaflet blade length: 4 to 8 inches; 2 to 4 inches

Leaf color: blue or blue-green; green

Fall color: no fall color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

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Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Flower

Flower color: lavender

Flower characteristics: pleasant fragrance; spring flowering; summer flowering; very showy

Fruit

Fruit covering: fleshy

Fruit color: black

Fruit characteristics: does not attract wildlife; inconspicuous and not showy; no significant litter problem

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: bark is thin and easily damaged from mechanical impact; droop as the tree grows, and will require pruning for vehicular or pedestrian clearance beneath the canopy; routinely grown with, or trainable to be grown with, multiple trunks; showy trunk; tree wants to grow with several trunks but can be trained to grow with a single trunk; no thorns

Pruning requirement: requires pruning to develop strong structure

Breakage: resistant

Current year twig color: green

Current year twig thickness: medium; thin

Culture

Light requirement: tree grows in part shade/part sun; tree grows in full sun

Soil tolerances: clay; loam; sand; acidic; alkaline; well-drained

Drought tolerance: high

Aerosol salt tolerance: moderate

Other

Roots: surface roots are usually not a problem

Winter interest: no special winter interest

Outstanding tree: tree has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more

Invasive potential: No entries found.

Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

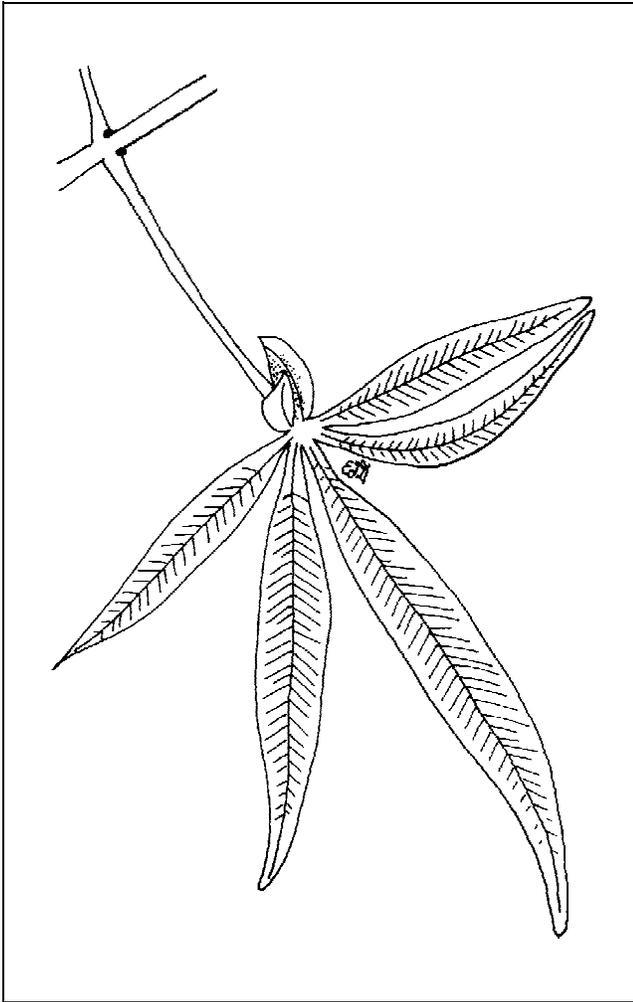


Figure 3. Foliage of Chastetree.

USE AND MANAGEMENT

Chastetree is used effectively in the mixed shrubby border or as a specimen. It is usually seen with a multiple trunk but can be trained in the nursery into a tree with one or several trunks, if so desired. Occasionally used as a street or median tree since it will not grow up and into powerlines, but branches tend to droop toward the ground and would hinder traffic visibility if planted too close to the street. Median planting would be fine if there is adequate horizontal space for the crown to develop and spread. Since the flowers attract bees, locate it accordingly.

Chastetree prefers a loose, well-drained soil that is moist or on the dry side, not wet, but will tolerate drained clay or sandy soils. The tree often suffers from dieback in organic, mucky, or other soil which is kept too moist, such as in the New Orleans or Dallas areas. Chastetree should be planted in full sun or light shade, and will tolerate hot weather extremely well, moderate salt air exposure and alkaline soil.

In the colder regions (USDA hardiness zones 6b and 7), Chastetree can be killed to the ground by severe winters and is more often seen as a multistemmed shrub. Chastetree is a fast-grower and can easily recover its size when cold weather prunes it. Very similar to *Vitex negundo*, which also is called Chastetree, *Vitex agnus-castus* is not as cold hardy as *Vitex negundo* (grows in USDA hardiness zone 6a). *Vitex agnus-castus* may survive in USDA hardiness zone 6a if protected from winter winds.

Several cultivars are available which offer flower color variety. 'Silver Spire' and 'Alba' have white flowers, and 'Rosea' has pink flowers.

Propagate by softwood cuttings in early summer or by seeds.

Pests

No pests are of major concern.

Diseases

Leaf spot can almost defoliate the tree. Root rot can cause decline in soils which are kept too moist.