

The Herb Society of America's Notable Native™ Shrub 2019 *Ceanothus* L., *Ceanothus* species



Family: Rhamnaceae (Buckthorn)

Latin Name: *Ceanothus* L.; 54 species and 10 hybrids

Common Name: Ceanothus, New Jersey tea, Jersey tea, Redstem, Buckbrush, Whitethorn and more

Growth: Shrubby perennials growing from 1.5'—20'tall, depending on species

Hardiness: Zones 4-11, by species

Light: Full sun to partial sun

Soil: Well drained; adapts to a range of pH levels; tolerates drought

Water: moderate to dry

Use: Tea from dried leaves; ornamental—fragrant

Propagation: seeds, Semi-hardwood cuttings, softwood cuttings

Ceanothus americanus, New Jersey Tea, Redroot
Courtesy: R.W. Smith, LBJ Wildflower Center,
www.wildflower.org

History & Description

Ceanothus is a New World genus in the Family Rhamnaceae. The genus name is from the Greek for “spiny plant” and first applied by Theophrastis to a plant now believed to be *Cirsium arvense* (thistle). Linnaeus later used the name for the current genus.

Ceanothus species have foamy, white, greenish or blue sprays of flowers. The shrubs or small trees have simple, usually serrated, alternate or opposite leaves and thorns depending on species.

John Bartram collected the plants, shipping them to England, and in 1765 *C. americanus* was presented to the Royal Society by the Worshipful Company of Apothecaries.

In 1786, Thomas Jefferson, in Paris at the time, wrote to Bartram’s son, asking for seed of *C. americanus* for a friend who “will have the goodness to pay your demand for these things.” He also asked for 27 plants and seed of an additional 24 species.

Lewis and Clark made note in their journals of *C. velutinus* in the fall of 1805 “on the Rocky Mountain waters of the Kooskooskee (Clearwater River)” and again in the spring of 1806 “near the foot of the Rocky Mountain on Collins (Lolo) Creek.”

Ceanothus rapidly gained attention and favor

for the garden, which continues to the present.

There are 54 species and 10 hybrids in the US. Of those species, 46 appear only in the state of CA.

Ceanothus americanus is native in the eastern half of US and CA. It is an upright, rounding deciduous shrub growing to 3.5' with gray-green, oblong, serrate, somewhat glossy leaves with puckering along the veins. Tiny white, fragrant flowers open May–July in rounded panicles visited by bees, beetles, hummingbirds and butterflies. It has a sturdy, deep taproot adapted to fire. The dried leaves are used as a caffeine-free tea substitute.

The second most widespread *Ceanothus* in the US is *C. herbaceus*. It grows through the central part of the US and as far west as MT. (See maps on next page.) It is a smaller shrub commonly known as Jersey tea or Redroot. It too

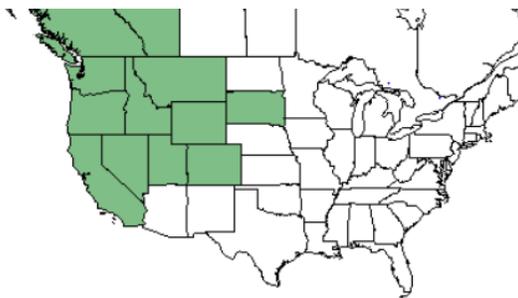


has panicles of white flowers, but the leaves are smaller and narrower.

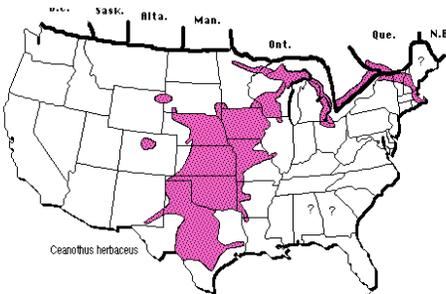
C. velutinus, Snowbrush or Redroot, is native to generally higher elevations in western states. The photo below was taken at Seven Oaks Nursery in OR. This one is evergreen with glossy, thicker leaves that are fragrant when crushed. It grows to as much as 8' in suitable conditions. Its native habitat is open, sunny, rocky hillsides, and partially shaded forests on moderately dry to moderately moist slopes and on steep canyon slopes.



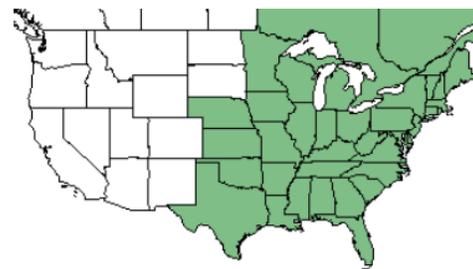
C. velutinus, Snowbrush. Photo: Seven Oaks Native Nursery, Albany, OR. www.sevenoaksnativenursery.com/



The 3 most widespread *Ceanothus* species in the US. Reported in states shaded in green and pink
Left– *C. velutinus*,



Center– *C. herbaceus*,



Right– *C. americanus*

Culture & Habitat

Ceanothus americanus is distributed throughout Central and Eastern United States and into Ontario and Quebec. It is native to habitats which have sandy to gritty, well-drained soils in open forests to prairies such as gravel or sand prairies, sandy savannahs, rocky upland forests, and Pine Barrens. Several of these habitats are prone to fire. New Jersey tea and others have adapted to this by forming a large rootstock that is resistant to fire damage and developing seed that germinates after exposure to fire.

This species is adaptable to a variety of garden environments. It grows in both acidic and alkaline soils so is tolerant of a wide pH range. It will grow in sun to light shade and in droughty conditions once it is established. New Jersey tea can fix its own nitrogen and is able to tolerate lean soils. It will not tolerate poorly drained soils or wet conditions. This shrub forms a thick rootstock which can make transplanting difficult once the plant has developed a significant root. Transplanting is best done in the first three to four years of growth.

Uses

The common name of the species *C. americanus* came about following extensive use by colonists of the dried leaves during the Revolutionary War as a substitute for tea in spite of the fact that the beverage lacks caffeine. It is believed that the practice was learned from Native American tribes. It was also used during the Civil War years when the price of tea and coffee was prohibitive in the Great Plains regions. The leaves of other species may also be used, as they have a warm honey fragrance. Peterson declares the tea, prepared from thoroughly dried leaves, excellent.

Chemical compounds from this plant have been found to affect the speed of blood coagulation (Lynch et al., 1958), and they

have been found to have antimicrobial properties on oral pathogens.

Native Americans and others chewed the leaves to relieve irritations of the mouth and throat.

A green dye is obtained from the flowers; a cinnamon-colored dye is obtained from the whole plant; and a red dye is obtained from the root.

Propagation

According to Michael Dirr, the seed of *Ceanothus americanus* is difficult to germinate as it appears to have a double dormancy requirement. Various resources suggested that the seed may need to be heat treated to simulate the heat of a fire, and then scarified. But this does not guarantee that germination will be successful. It is easier to root softwood cuttings with the addition of a rooting compound such as IBA (a rooting hormone).

Ceanothus species are known to cross-pollinate, making identification difficult.

Plant them in masses for best effect. Great on steep slopes.

Plant Sources

As *Ceanothus* is widespread, check with your local nursery.

Prairie Nursery, Neil Diboll
Westfield, WI
<https://www.prairienursery.com/prairie-nursery/about-us/>

Seven Oaks Nursery
29730 Harvest Drive SW
Albany, OR 97321
Phone: 541-757-6520
www.sevenoaksnativenursery.com

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