

Vitex agnus castus - Growing Guide

Growing Vitex Agnus Castus

Chaste Tree

Vitex are mainly a tropical genus of plants forming part of Verbenaceae. When you look at the flowers of Vitex agnus castus you can certainly get the verberna bit.

What is however far more amusing to learn is the meaning of the name Agnus Castus and why this is commonly known (quite ridiculously) as the 'chaste' tree. It is thought that the Greek name for the plant was 'Agnos'. The same word is an adjective in Greek which means 'holy' or 'chaste'. These two words meant that the plant became a symbol of chastity in Hellenic or Athenian times when ladies willing to preserve their chastity made beds of the leaves of this shrub.

In later times, and probably for the same reasons, the leaves were regarded as the opposite of an aphrodisiac. However the seed was actually used at least from the 17th century as a cure for venereal diseases to assist those who had been violated rather than to preserve their chastity. The Latin translation of 'agnus' means lamb and again the term 'Chaste Lamb Tree' makes the plant sound innocent when it was actually the exact opposite!

Anyway, back to the shrub or small tree itself. It is deciduous with an open spreading habit. The leaves are palmate with five or seven lance shaped dark green and aromatic leaflets. With us at Caerhays it has achieved about 6ft in height after 10 or 12 years but the spread is already much the same.

One of the excitements (apart from the chastity or otherwise) of this plant is that it flowers in long violet tubular panicles at the very tips of each year's new growth in September and October when little else is performing.

The flowers are as fragrant as the leaves but it would have been a fairly pungent odour for a would be virgin to have put up with for long. Perhaps that was the whole point!

The plant likes full sun in a well-drained soil. It is a Mediterranean species but, given some shelter from cold wind, it has proved perfectly frost hardy with us and at Kew. As the flowers appear in terminal panicles of new growth older plants can be pruned back hard like buddleias to encourage more flowers in the next year.

Seed only sets after a very hot summer but softwood or semi-ripe cuttings root fairly easily.

How could you not try to grow a plant with this sort of story for yourself?



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