

Vitex (*Vitex agnus castus*)

Common Names: Chaste berry, chaste tree fruit, monk's pepper, vitex agnus-castus.

Location: Vitex is an aromatic deciduous tree native to Greece and Italy.

Description: It grows to a height of twenty-one feet and bears palm-shaped leaves and small, lilac-like flowers. The Greeks knew of vitex in the time of Homer, more than 1,000 years before it was used in China. Homer's sixth-century-BC epic *The Iliad* mentions vitex as a symbol of chastity capable of protecting people against evil. According to the first-century Greek historian Pliny, chaste berries strewn on the beds of soldiers' wives was a testimony of the wives' faithfulness while their husbands were in battle. As the common name of the plant, chaste tree, suggests, vitex was thought to reduce the libido. Vitex berries were chewed by monks to stop unwanted sexual desire.

Properties: The ripe yellow-red berries have been harvested in the fall for use in herbal medicine for thousands of years in both Europe and China. In Europe, herbalists also used the leaves and flower tops.

Uses: Vitex has the effect of stimulating and normalizing pituitary gland function. It normalizes the activity of female sex hormones, and is indicated for dysmenorrhea, premenstrual syndrome (PMS), menopausal symptoms, and other disorders related to hormone imbalance. Unlike other herbs used for this purpose, vitex does not contain plant estrogens. Instead, it contains at least two forms of testosterone, as well as the growth-stimulant hormones androstenedione and progesterone. Vitex also seems to lower production of the hormone prolactin. Benefits of vitex for specific health conditions include treatment of the following: acne, fibrocystic breasts, menopause-related problems, menstrual problems, premenstrual syndrome (PMS), endometriosis and infertility, and prostate cancer.

Doses: Vitex is available in capsules, tablets, and tinctures.

Warnings: In using this herb, it is important to remember that for long-term relief, it is necessary to continue taking the herb for three to six months after symptoms disappear. Vitex should be taken in the morning. In very rare cases, using vitex can result in a longer period or heavier menstruation. Women of reproductive age must use vitex with caution, since it has been known to stimulate the release of multiple eggs from the ovary, potentially resulting in multiple births. Pregnant women should not take vitex. Despite the herb's traditional use to stimulate lactation, nursing mothers should avoid it because it suppresses the hormone prolactin, which is essential for breast milk production. Men seeking to become fathers should not take vitex. Animal studies indicate that the seeds can completely halt sperm production, reduce testosterone production, and cause the testicles to atrophy. Vitex should not be combined with estrogen replacement therapy or with birth control pills. Women with estrogen-sensitive cancers originating in the breast, cervix, or uterus should avoid vitex. Animal experiments indicate that medications to regulate dopamine in the brain may be affected in unpredictable ways by this herb. These medications include L-dopa (Parlodel), prescribed for Parkinson's disease; the psychoactive medication haloperidol (Haldol), prescribed for psychosis; and bupropion (Zyban), prescribed to help smokers who want to quit. Vitex should be used with caution by those who are weak or anemic. Minor gastrointestinal upset and a mild skin rash with itching have been reported in less than 2 percent of the women monitored while taking vitex.

Also known as

Vitex agnus-castus, Chaste Berry, Monk's Berry, Vitex, Chastetree, Chinese Vitex, Gattilier, Hemp Tree, Monk's Pepper, Vitex, Texas Lilac, Vitex rotundifolia, Vitex trifolia, Viticis Fructus.

Introduction

Chaste tree is a small shrub with lance shaped leaves and purple flowers that are native to the eastern Mediterranean and easily grown in warm climates around the world. Its peppery fruit has been used for over two thousands years, or at least since the time of the Greek physician Dioscorides who recommended it in beverages intended to help the wives of soldiers remain chaste while their husbands were in battle. The fruit was used by both man and women in ancient Greece and Rome, and by monks during the Middle Ages to suppress sexual desire. Pliny the Elder noted that Athenian maidens would put the leaves under their beds during the festival of Thesmophoria to help preserve their chastity. Dioscorides, in his *De Materia Medica*, claimed that when mixed with pennyroyal, it was a remedy for headaches that go concurrently with menstrual difficulties. He also noted that it could be used as a topical antidote for spider and snake bites. In the *Medical Formulary of Al Samarquandi* (circa 1200 CE), it was said to be a vital ingredient in a "black remedy" that was said to cure "insanity, the stroke of madness, and epilepsy". It is still sold in Egyptian bazaars as a "calming agent to hysteria". In Germany, chaste tree is a common treatment for gynecological disorders and it has recently become popular in the U.S. as well.

Constituents

Acubin, agnuside, casticin, chrysophanol D, alpha- and beta-pinene, isovitexin and vitexin.

Parts Used

Dried fruiting berry

Typical Preparations

Usually used as a tincture, however may be cracked and sprinkled on food, producing a slight pepper taste or as a tea infusion.

Summary

Chaste berry has been used for centuries to treat constipation, flatulence, and hangovers, and to bring on menstruation and lactation. In modern herbal medicine, the herb is mainly used to treat breast swelling and breast pain caused by excessive secretion of the hormone prolactin during PMS or cyclic mastalgia. The herb can lengthen the proliferative (first) phase of the menstrual cycle, and also relieve water weight, headache, and fatigue.

Precautions

Men shouldn't take chaste berry. Testicular atrophy could result after repeated use. Binging on sugar, alcohol, or marijuana will block the herb's action on dopamine receptors in the brain and cancel out its effects. Not recommended while pregnant.

Botanical: Agnus castus

Family: N.O. Verbenaceae

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---**Part Used**---The ripe berries.

---**Habitat**---Shores of the Mediterranean.

---**Description**---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 1/2 inches long, leaflets linear, lance-shaped, toothed, dark green above, grey beneath with a very close felt; stalks of leaflets 1/4 inch or less long- flowers fragrant, produced in September or October, in whorls on slender racemes 3 to 6 inches long, sometimes branched; the berries somewhat like peppercorns, dark purple, halfcovered by their sage-green calyces, yellowish within, hard, having an aromatic odour; taste warm, peculiar. 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.

---**Medicinal Action and Uses**---The fresh ripe berries are pounded to a pulp and used in the form of a tincture for the relief of paralysis, pains in the limbs, weakness, etc.

---**Other Species**---*Vitex trifolia*, the three-leaved Chaste Tree, has similar properties.