

Ceanothus americanus

[Synonyms : *Ceanothus americanus* var. *intermedius*, *Ceanothus americanus* var. *pitcheri*, *Ceanothus intermedius*]

NEW JERSEY TEA is a deciduous shrub. Native to eastern North America it has tiny fragrant, white flowers.

It is also known as American ceanothus, *Amerikanischer Seckelstrauch* (German), Blue tea bush, *Céanothe* (French), *Ceanoto* (Italian), Indian tea, Jersey tea, Jersey tea root, Mountain-sweet, New Jersey tea, Red root, Red twig, *Säckelblume* (German), Sprangles, *Tabe-hi* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), Walpole tea, Wild pepper, Wild snowball, and *Zeres cayt* (Turkish).

The flowers are pollinated by many different insects attracted by the scent.

Americanus means ‘of or from America (North or South)’.

It is said that not only housewives (early settled in the mid-1600s in the New World) desperate to find an alternative to the expensive, imported tea which was so heavily taxed by the British King George III but also soldiers fighting much later, during the American Civil War of the 1860s, resorted in both instances to making tea with dried New Jersey tea leaves. These instances are said to have contributed to one of the plant’s other names New Jersey tea. (The tea itself was known to many as ‘pong-pong tea’ from one of its North American Indian names.) While the name Red root acknowledges that the root provided a red dye.

This species has also been used to obtain a cinnamon-coloured wool dye.

The leaves provided a tea-like drink for local North American Indian tribes, including the Meskwaki, Omaha, Dakota, Winnebago, Ponca, Menominee and Pawnee Indians. Records suggest that the European settlers’ use of the dried leaves for tea (instead of imported Indian tea which, incidentally, the Menominee Indians obtained from the incomers) only became firmly established in about the mid-19th Century. It is mooted that this practice was learnt from those among the Indian tribes who served in the 1860s American Civil War during which they would have had to have resorted to a substitute tea.

Apparently the shrub’s woody roots also provided fuel, in the absence of anything better, when the Omaha, Pawnee, Dakota, Ponca and Winnebago tribes were out hunting buffalo.

It seems that New Jersey tea has probably been familiar for some centuries to local North American Indian tribes as a medicinal plant. It was an ingredient in a wash used by the Cherokee tribe in the treatment of cancer – and by the Alabama tribe on injured legs. As the Doctrine of Signatures suggested plant applications to some Europeans in past centuries, similarly the Menominee Indians (if not others) are believed to have associated the partially tangled red roots with the intestines and, in turn, stomach troubles for which the plant was then used. It was also one of the remedies used by the Cherokee and Meskwaki tribes for some bowel disorders, the latter (and the Iroquois) used it to ease diarrhoea, and the Chippewa tribe took it as a laxative. In addition the Iroquois prescribed it for a range of problems from venereal disease, various female problems and colds to an ingredient in a treatment for diabetes. The Menominee used it as a remedy for coughs, the

Chippewa treated some lung disorders with it (and toothache), and the Meskwaki used it for snake bites.

New Jersey tea was first introduced to Britain before 1713 as records show that it was one of the plants cultivated in Henry Compton's (1632-1713) Fulham garden when he was Bishop of London. Shortly after this it was lost and had to be re-introduced, this time by the English botanist and naturalist, Peter Collinson (1694-1768) in 1751.

Medicinally, herbalists have recommended New Jersey tea for treating dysentery, asthma, bronchitis, tuberculosis and whooping-cough.