

Vitex agnus-castus

[Synonyms : *Agnus-castus vulgaris*, *Vitex pseudo-negundo*]

CHASTE TREE is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to southern Europe it has small fragrant, lavender or lilac flowers with projecting stamens.

It is also known as Abraham's balm, *Abrahamsbaum* (German), *Agneau chaste* (French), *Agno casto* (Italian), *Agnus castus* (Dutch, English), *Alecrim-de-angola* (Portuguese), *Alygaría* (Greek), *Arbre au poivre* (French), *Athlah* (Arabic), *Barátcsérje* (Hungarian), *Chasteberry*, *Drmek obecny* (Portuguese), *Flor da castidade* (Portuguese), *Ghadiba* (Maltese), *Gotillier* (French), *Hemp tree*, *Indian spice*, *Keuschbaummiillen* (German), *Keuschlamm* (German), *Lilac chaste tree*, *Lygariá* (Greek), *Mai ya* (Chinese), *Mönchspfeffer* (German), *Monkshood pepper tree*, *Monk's pepper*, *Munkpeppar* (Swedish), *Panjangusht* (Persian), *Peperello* (Italian), *Sage tree*, *Siveydenpuu* (Finnish), *Vitex*, *Wild pepper*, and *Yemen safront* (Turkish); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of coldness, and indifference.

The flowers are pollinated by butterflies.

Agnus-castus is derived from Latin *agnus* (lamb) and *castus* (clean, pure) components meaning 'chaste', and is an old name for the species.

The name Chaste tree comes particularly from the practices in bygone ages of Athenian women who put the leaves in their beds and in more recent centuries European monks who used the ground seed as pepper (in both cases to promote chastity). Today as novices enter a monastery or convent in Italy the flowers are scattered on the ground in front of them.

Authorities know from records that the chaste tree was introduced to England before 1570.

Despite what for many would be the traditional and all-permeating aura surrounding the chaste tree's seeds it seems that there are some who hold that the fresh aromatic seeds are the antithesis of an anaphrodisiac.

The chaste tree is the source of a yellow dye.

In India the seeds have been used in veterinary medicine particularly to treat wind in horses.

Today in southern Europe the branches or twigs are used for basketwork.

Medicinally, herbalists have in the past used fresh pounded berries to treat paralysis. It was also used in 13th Century Arabian remedies for insanity and epilepsy. Today the seeds can be bought in Egyptian bazaars as a calming remedy for hysteria. In recent times the seeds have also gained a reputation as a male aphrodisiac and they are used in modern Western gynaecological preparations.