

## California Lilac (*Ceanothus* sp.)

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*Consider new Ceanothus varieties for tough, dry locations*

*Ceanothus* is a genus of native North American shrubs with about 60 species. The name *Ceanothus* comes from the Greek name *keanotos*, spiny plant. The shrubs are commonly thought of as California native, hence the common name on the west coast of 'California lilac'.

About 36 of the species are found only in California, but there are several *Ceanothus* species that range over the western, mid-western and eastern United States and southern Canada. *C. americanus* is native to a wide area of the east and is known as 'New Jersey Tea'.

Virtually all the western species are found in very dry habitats. *Ceanothus* inhabit scrub and woodland on exposed, dry slopes from mountains to coastal regions. *Ceanothus* can grow on poor soils as they have nitrogen fixing bacteria that form nodules on the roots. As a result, the characteristic that the species of *Ceanothus* share, and for which they are often known, is tolerance of poor, dry soil. It is in these sorts of situations that the plants are best utilized.

The most commonly grown *Ceanothus* in the PNW are 'Victoria' and *C. gloriosus*. These two are very different in habit, the former being a rounded shrub to 8' tall, the latter having a low, widely spreading habit and so is used principally as a groundcover. Both are hardy and attractive varieties. Yet these two only offer a fraction of the range of size, habit, color and texture that the genus has to offer. There are plenty of other, less-commonly grown cultivars that are well-adapted to our region and worth growing. *Ceanothus cuneatus* var. *rigidus* 'Snowball' grows to 3' tall and 6' wide, with gray foliage and white flowers in April, and makes a great groundcover. A larger growing plant, 'Wheeler Canyon', has a mounding form to 4' tall and 8' wide with blue flowers and would be excellent as a large-scale evergreen groundcover. 'Blue Jeans' is a smaller evergreen plant to 4' by 4' with small, tough medium green leaves. It is one of the earliest *Ceanothus* to bloom, usually in April.

*Ceanothus* "Concha", photo by Neil Bell

