

FAMILY: Rhamnaceae GENUS: Ceanothus COMMON NAME: California Lilac
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Ceanothus is a large genus of diverse North American native shrubs in the buckthorn family Rhamnaceae, many native to California. Typically found in the foothills or mountains, the genus includes over 60 species of shrubs, from 1-6 feet high, or small trees, up to 18-20 feet tall. The majority of the species are evergreen and are easily identified by their shared unique leaf-vein structure, i.e. three prominent parallel veins. Their leaves are opposite or alternate, small, simple, and mostly with serrated margins. The leaves have a shiny upper surface and vary in size from 1/2 inch to 3 inches. Many of the very drought-tolerant species have spiny holly-like leaves.

Ceanothus flowers are mostly blue in a wide variety of shades, but a few are white or pink. The flowers are tiny and produced in large, dense, intensely fragrant clusters, usually between March and May. Ceanothus species are used as food plants by the larvae of some butterfly (including Pipevine Swallowtail, Brown Elfin, Hedgerow Hairstreak, and Echo Blue) and moth species, and also attract bees and other beneficial insects. Propagation of Ceanothus is by seed. It can also sprout from roots and/or stems. Seeds are dispersed propulsively from capsules and can remain viable for hundreds of years. In habitat, the seeds germinate only in response to range fires and forest fires.

Historically, the name Ceanothus comes from the Greek name keanothos, “spiny plant” - it is also Latin for “thistle.” *Ceanothus thyrisflorus* (blueblossom) was the first California species introduced into European gardens (1837). Early California Indians used the fresh or dried flowers of some varieties for washing, lathered with a little water into a soap. The lather is thought to be good for the relief of poison oak, eczema, and rash. Native Americans used the dried leaves as an herbal tea, and early pioneers used the plant as a substitute for black tea. Miwok Indians made baskets from Ceanothus branches. *C. integerrimus* (deer brush) has been used by North American tribes to ease childbirth.

As with so many native plants, good drainage seems to be the key to success with *Ceanothus*. If soil and drainage are less than ideal, it is better to plant the rootball higher than the surrounding grade or try to plant on slopes. Most species need full sun. As with most California native plants, the ideal time to plant *Ceanothus* is late fall through early winter. Also like most California native plants, *Ceanothus* may be short-lived in gardens using drip irrigation, summer water, and soil amendments. In the garden, one or two deep waterings a month for established plants is sufficient. In the wild, *Ceanothus* plants have a natural life cycle of 10-15 years or more.

Hungry deer love *Ceanothus*. Generally, the smaller and more prickly the leaf, the greater the deer resistance. Most *Ceanothus* can be shaped by tip pruning, like those deer in the wild, and cleaning out interior or low dead growth. It will not produce shoots from old wood.

Ceanothus roots fix nitrogen in the soil. These plants will suffer if their roots are handled. Fertilizing is not recommended as it might kill off the good soil micro-organisms. Mycorrhizal *frankia* and associates need to properly develop and grow to help *Ceanothus* thrive.

Ceanothus can be planted as specimens, screens, hedges, groundcovers, next to a wall, and in shrub borders. They are ideal near oak trees which have similar water requirements.

The California Native Plant Society lists these selected examples for San Diego: *Ceanothus* 'Joyce Coulter' grows in a mound 2' tall and 8' wide and has medium blue flowers; *Ceanothus* 'Frosty Blue' grows to 8' tall and 8' wide; it has dense foliage and white frosted, deep blue flowers; the profusely blooming *Ceanothus* 'Julia Phelps' has small, dark green leaves and dark blue flower clusters; and *Ceanothus* 'Ray Hartman,' a fairly fast growing large shrub or small tree reaches 10-20' in height with large lavender blue flower clusters in mid-spring and late fall, and is one of the most garden tolerant *Ceanothus*. Although California lilacs are commonly carried in neighborhood nurseries, the largest selection of these beautiful plants will be found in a native plant nursery.

