



Heavenly Ceanothus

BY NAN STERMAN

There's a friendly rivalry between gardeners on the East and West coasts, but when it comes to the beautiful flowering shrubs in the genus *Ceanothus*, the West Coast wins hands down.

CALIFORNIA IS well known for its annual show of wildflowers, including California poppies (*Eschscholzia californica*) and farewell to spring (*Clarkia amoena*). But last spring, hillsides from the Pacific Coast to the Sierra Nevada were painted bright white, pale blue, indigo, and almost purple by the flowers of dozens of species of evergreen shrubs in the genus *Ceanothus*.

One might expect a big bloom to follow a generous rainy season. Yet, up and down the state, rainfall was far below normal. In my community just north of San Diego, for example, three inches of rain fell; that's a third of normal. San Francisco rainfall was 30 percent below normal, Los Angeles rainfall was 61 percent below normal. Yet statewide, the *Ceanothus* bloom was the best in recent memory. For Cali-

fornia gardeners suffering through a prolonged drought, the bloom provided an opportunity to appreciate these beautiful native shrubs anew.

A GENUS DIVIDED

The genus *Ceanothus* belongs to the buckthorn family (Rhamnaceae). The name *Ceanothus* derives from the Greek word *keanthos*, which means “spiny

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Above: A selection of the hybrid *C. x pallidus*, 'Marie Simon' is prized for its frothy pink flower clusters. **Opposite:** A large shrub popular in California coastal gardens, 'Dark Star' has rosy pink flower buds that open into cerulean blue flowerheads.

plant” or “thistle.” However, not all members of the genus are spiny. They are commonly called ceanothus, which can be both singular or plural. Some references also list California lilac or wild lilac as common names, but this is misleading because they are not at all related to true lilacs (*Syringa* spp.).

There are roughly 50 to 60 species in the genus, all native to North America, ranging from Canada to Florida, west to California and south into Guatemala. The center of ceanothus diversity, however, is the California Floristic Province, which covers a span of about 1,000 miles from Baja California, Mexico, in the south up to southwestern Oregon. Some 41 species are native in this region, which is noted for its Mediterranean climate: hot, dry summers; and precipitation—rain or snow—only from fall through spring. As a rule, ceanothus are adapted to soils with minimal organic matter and low fertility—another characteristic typical of Mediterranean climates.

Although Western gardeners enjoy the lion’s share of *Ceanothus* species, there are

a few temperate climate species and cultivars adapted to other regions. Prominent among these is New Jersey tea (*Ceanothus americanus*)—native to 36 states and



While broadly adapted to eastern gardens, New Jersey tea has limited ornamental appeal.

Ontario, Canada—which is the most widespread and adaptable member of the genus. There are also a number of hybrids developed by European breeders.

A major difference between the temperate-climate species and the Mediterranean-climate species is that the latter are evergreen. Woody branches are covered with leaves from three inches long and half as wide, to tiny rounded leaves no bigger than the head of an eraser. Many species have tough, leathery leaves typical of plants from areas where infrequent precipitation makes water conservation a necessity. Some leaves are deeply grooved, some smooth, others slightly hairy.

All ceanothus produce clusters of tiny buds that erupt into rounded inflorescences. These range in size from as small as a quarter to almost a ping-pong ball, depending on the species or cultivar. Their fragrance and colors attract more than gardeners and nature lovers; they also draw birds, along with bees, butterflies, and other beneficial insects.

Another thing they all have in common is the surprising ability to fix nitrogen. Nitro-

gen fixing—isolating nitrogen gas from the air and converting it to a form that plants use—is well known in leguminous plants, and is also seen in alders (*Alnus* spp.) and bayberries (*Myrica* spp.). As with those plants, ceanothus have sophisticated relationships with bacteria that live in nodules on the plants' roots. The bacteria “fix” nitrogen and supply it to their host plant.

BREEDING AND SELECTION

Ceanothus are promiscuous plants according to California nursery owner David Fross, who along with Dieter Wilkin literally wrote the book on *Ceanothus* (see “Resources,” page 37). The first efforts to breed new varieties began with the introduction of New Jersey tea to British gardens in the late 1700s. Shortly thereafter, white flowering inland Jersey tea (*C. herbaceus*) from the center of North America, and brilliant blue-flowering Mexican *C. caeruleus* followed.

French and Belgian plant breeders valued New Jersey tea and inland Jersey tea for their hardiness and large leaf sizes. From *C. caeruleus* they tweezed out flowers in shades of violet, blue, and pink. Some of these hybrids—*Ceanothus* × *delilianus* ‘Gloire de Versailles’ and pink-flowering *C. × pallidus* ‘Marie Simon’, for instance, are still available today.

In more recent times, ceanothus haven't had much attention from plant breeders, at least not in the United States. Instead, new cultivars tend to be selections from the wild, or arise as nursery and garden hybrids. In these cases, individual plants with more brightly colored flowers, stronger fragrance, or other characteristics that distinguish them from the standard species are selected and tested for garden worthiness.

Given this rich history of breeding and selection, we have a wealth of ceanothus to choose from today. The true key to success with these plants is to choose selections for your garden that are native to areas with similar growing conditions and climate. Here are some recommendations for ones that do well in California, the Pacific Northwest, the Rocky Mountains, and temperate regions.

CHOICES FOR CALIFORNIA

Nearly every habitat and microclimate in this crazy quilt of western terra firma is home to ceanothus in a wide variety of sizes and habits. The following easy-to-



Ceanothus come in a range of habits, from shrubby or treelike ‘Concha’, top, to the groundcovering ‘Yankee Point’, above, shown in a hillside garden designed by Suzanne Porter.

find ones showcase the genus's diversity.

Among the tree-sized ceanothus is *C. 'Ray Hartman'*, an upright shrub that grows to 20 feet tall and wide. Leaves are three or four inches long and deep green. From late winter into early spring, it drips with clusters of deep blue flowers. In my garden, I know 'Ray Hartman' is blooming when I can hear bees humming from my kitchen window. It prefers full sun and is hardy to 10 to 15 degrees Fahrenheit (F).

Another good tree-sized selection is *C. thyrsoflorus* var. *thyrsoflorus* 'Snow Flurry' from California's Big Sur coast. This vig-

Ceanothus 'Dark Star' is a popular cultivar that is hardy to 15 degrees F. Fast-growing and upright, this shrub reaches four to eight feet tall by eight to 12 feet wide with small, dark green leaves, making it perfect for an informal hedge or screen. In early spring, it erupts in buds the color of grape bubblegum, followed by vibrant blue flowers. Grow it in full sun.

Parry's ceanothus (*Ceanothus parryi*) is native to chaparral, evergreen forests, and redwood forests on coastal mountains from Northern California into west-central Oregon. Deep blue flowers appear in



Growing to only a foot tall, 'Diamond Heights'—shown here paired with blue-flowering nemesia—forms a dense groundcover with chartreuse and green variegated leaves.

orous grower tops out around 15 to 20 feet tall and 12 to 35 feet wide. In early spring, puffs of white flowers cover the branches and contrast beautifully with shiny green leaves. This selection takes pruning well and tolerates foggy coastal conditions, part shade, heavy soils, and temperatures down to 15 degrees F.

The slightly arched branches of sun-loving *C. 'Concha'* rise six to eight feet tall by six to 12 feet wide and are densely covered in narrow, deep green leaves. It has rounded clusters of deep blue flowers in spring. It is fairly tolerant of both heavy soils and overwatering, and is hardy to 10 degrees F.

April on shrubs that grow eight to 12 feet tall. It is hardy to 20 degrees F.

To light up a shady spot, try *C. thyrsoflorus* var. *thyrsoflorus* El Dorado ('Perado'). Its leaves have chartreuse margins with deep green center markings and provide a stunning background for its bright blue flowers. It grows to eight feet tall and wide and is hardy to 10 degrees F.

Much like El Dorado, *C. thyrsoflorus* var. *griseus* 'Diamond Heights' (syn. *C. griseus* var. *horizontalis* 'Diamond Heights') has bright chartreuse leaves with deep green centers, but plants are a foot tall by six feet wide. Grow it in light shade along the coast,

Sources

- Cistus Nursery**, Portland, OR. (503) 621-2233. www.cistus.com.
Forestfarm, Williams, OR. (541) 846-7269. www.forestfarm.com.
Joy Creek Nursery, Scappoose, OR. (503) 543-7474. www.joycreek.com.
Theodore Payne Nursery Store, Sun Valley, CA. (818) 768-1802. www.theodorepayne.org.
Tree of Life Nursery, San Juan Capistrano, CA. (949) 728-0685. www.californianativeplants.com. (Nursery pickup only.)
Woodlanders, Inc., Aiken, SC. (804) 648-7522. www.woodlanders.net.

Resources

- California Native Plants for the Garden** by Carol Bornstein, David Fross, and Bart O'Brien. Cachuma Press, Los Olivos, CA, 2005.
Ceanothus by David Fross and Dieter Wilken. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2006.
The New Sunset Western Garden Book (9th edition) edited by Kathleen Norris Brenzel. Sunset Publishing, Menlo Park, CA, 2012.

or in more shade further inland. If it's in too much sun, the leaves fade to a ghastly yellow. It is hardy to 20 degrees F.

Another groundcover selection is *C. thyrsoflorus* var. *griseus* 'Yankee Point', which grows three feet tall with a 10 or 12 foot spread. Leaves are deep green, and its early spring flowers are medium blue. It is hardy to 10 degrees F.

CHOICES FOR THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

In the Pacific Northwest, Oregon native ceanothus and many popular California cultivars do well, even up into the mild areas of Puget Sound in Washington. "A lot of the standard California varieties are grown in Oregon west of the Cascades," says Paul Bonine of Xera Plants wholesale nursery in Sherwood, Oregon, "Our longer rain season extends the growing season so plants grow larger here."

Sean Hogan from Cistus Nursery in Portland echoes Bonine's experience: "It's all about the cool and dampish winter and dry summer." The challenge for Oregon

gardeners is winter cold. Along the coast, gardens tend to be USDA Zone 9 or 10, Hogan says, and ceanothus do fine. Further inland, where cool air flows down from Canada and temperatures can drop below 20 degrees F, the plants freeze.

Recommended performers in this region include *C. thyrsiflorus* 'Oregon Mist', which is hardy to zero degrees F. Planted as a street tree throughout Portland, this upright selection grows 18 feet tall and nine feet wide. The bark is greenish; flowers are turquoise or sky blue. 'Victoria' (hardy to 5 degrees F), another *C. thyrsiflorus* selection, grows nine feet tall. In May, they are covered with intensely dark blue flowers.

Also suggested is 'Puget Blue' (hardy to 10 degrees), a selection introduced by the Washington Park Arboretum in Seattle, Washington. Long, narrow leaves cover arching branches, forming a plant eight feet tall and 10 feet wide or larger. The flowers are an incredible, intense blue.

CHOICES FOR THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

In Colorado, Panayoti Kelaidis, senior curator and director of outreach at the Denver Botanic Gardens, says the Mediterranean climate ceanothus have yet to be grown successfully. Instead, he recommends inland Jersey tea (*C. herbaceus*, Zones 5–9, 9–3), a three-foot mounding shrub native from Canada to Texas, and east as far as North Carolina. Its white flowers bloom spring through summer, against bright green leaves.



A proven performer in the Pacific Northwest, 'Puget Blue' is a largish shrub with bright blue flowers.

Kelaidis describes snow brush (*C. velutinus*, Zones 7–10, 10–2) as “gorgeous,” but this mountain native is well suited only to the cool, higher elevations of western North America where, depending on its location, it can grow anywhere from three feet tall by six feet wide to 18 feet tall and wide. Its leaves, which smell like cinna-

mon when crushed, are glossy green with tiny hairs on the undersides.

CHOICES FOR TEMPERATE GARDENS

West Coast ceanothus have been tested in temperate climates according to Fross, but most of the results, he says, “have been disastrous. What takes them out is the mosaic

PLANTING AND CULTURAL GUIDELINES

When planting West Coast ceanothus, it's a good idea to set plants so the soil level is an inch or two higher than it was in the nursery container. They will settle a bit over time, but starting them slightly above grade ensures that water drains away from the crown.

Plant into unamended, native soil and don't add any fertilizer, which “makes ceanothus grow too fast and fall over in the wind,” according to Paul Bonine of Xera Plants. That said, if your soil is very heavy, consider planting into large mounds of better draining soil to avoid those wet conditions that encourage deadly soil fungi.

Water deeply at planting, then deeply but infrequently through the first summer or two until plants are established. After that, stop watering but do keep a layer of well-aged woody mulch around your plants to help keep moisture deep in the soil where you want roots to grow. It's unnecessary to add fertilizer because the nitrogen-fixing bacteria in their root nodules supply all the nitrogen they need.

Established specimens will tolerate judicious trimming or pruning of new growth, directly after flowering, if needed “to maintain a more compact form and improve the appearance of most species,” write Fross and Wilken in *Ceanothus*.

West Coast ceanothus are prone to a number of pests ranging from boring insects to stem galls and deer. Monitor plants regularly for signs of borers, and follow watering and other cultural guidelines to reduce susceptibility to some of the other insect pests. Use cages or fencing to protect young plants from deer browse in areas where the animals are prevalent.

Temperate region ceanothus are not as fussy about soil type and watering regimes as their evergreen counterparts, but they should still need little or no supplemental water or fertilizer once they are established. Plant them so their crowns are at ground level. —N.S.



The rangy habit of *C. x delilianus* 'Gloire de Versailles' is used to good effect along this stairway, providing access to its fragrant blue flowers.

of fungal organisms.” When you combine moisture with heat, Fross adds, the plants become extremely vulnerable to soil fungi.

Tony Avent, who is known for pushing horticultural boundaries at his Plant Delights Nursery in Raleigh, North Carolina, admits to a long list of Mediterranean climate ceanothus species he has killed before abandoning his quest. Too much moisture is the issue here, too. “Those ceanothus would be fine here,” he says, “except for our summer rains.”

Instead, temperate climate gardeners have found more success with the historic, three-way European hybrids such as *C. x delilianus* 'Gloire de Versailles' (Zones 7–9, 8–4), a deciduous ceanothus that grows six to 12 feet tall and wide with fragrant, pale blue flowers from summer to fall; and *C. x pallidus* 'Marie Simon' (Zones 6–9, 8–5), which has red stems and show-stopping musky pink flowers from summer into fall. Also deciduous, this vigorous shrub grows to five or six feet tall with a similar spread.

As the first species in the genus to be named and cultivated, New Jersey tea (*C. x pallidus*) has some claim to fame. It also has the broadest native range of any ceanothus and is relatively adaptable to a

range of sites from loamy woodland edges to sandy or rocky soils, and from full sun to part shade. In the garden, however, it has limited appeal. In *Native Trees, Shrubs, and Vines* (Houghton Mifflin, 1998), William Cullina writes that it “goes unnoticed for all but a few weeks in summer, when the branch tips are abuzz with all manner of insects attracted by its plumes of fine white honey-scented flowers.” Texas horticulturist Scott Ogden concurs, noting that its mid- to late summer flowers are attractive, but the plant is “hardly worth a mention otherwise.” Growing to three feet tall and spreading up to five feet in diameter, this suckering shrub is best suited to a naturalistic or wildlife garden.

DIVERSE AND DROUGHT-TOLERANT

Clearly, this genus offers an almost overwhelming number of beautiful shrubs for a variety of climates. However, outside of California, ceanothus have a reputation for being short-lived and suited only to well drained soils. While this may be true for some of them, more often than not it's improper growing conditions that are to blame.

That's what horticulturist Neil Bell of Oregon State University concluded after a four-year trial of 49 *Ceanothus* taxa at the

Oregon Garden in Silverton. Bell found good success with nearly all the ones he tested, which he grew in clay soil and left unirrigated after establishment. Based on these results, Bell advises that “the best use for ceanothus is combining them in unirrigated landscapes with other plants that require the same treatment. This includes some drought-tolerant native plants like oceanspray (*Holodiscus discolor*), snowberry (*Symphoricarpos alba*), or flowering currant (*Ribes sanguineum*). It will also include complimentary Mediterranean-climate plants from California and other areas of the world, assuming these are hardy in [your] area.”

Bonine of Xera Plants agrees that most ceanothus will do fine even in clay soils, as long as they aren't irrigated. “I tell people not to water them at all,” he says. When ceanothus are grown with a healthy respect for their “low water diet,” they prove to be beautiful shrubs that offer many rewards to our gardens.

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