

# *Vitex agnus-castus* L.

**Standardized Common Name:** Chaste Tree

**Other Common Names:** Agnus-Castus, Chaste Berry, Monk's Pepper

**Family:** Verbenaceae or Lamiaceae (Labiatae)

**Taxonomy:** *Vitex* includes about 250 species of trees and shrubs; it is a nearly cosmopolitan, but mostly tropical genus. *Vitex agnus-castus* is the only species native to Europe. It is now widespread as a result of escapes from cultivation.

**Description:** Shrub to 6 m tall; twigs 4-angled, grayish. Leaves opposite, petiolate, palmately compound; leaflets (3–)5–7(–9), nearly sessile, linear-lanceolate, 1.5–10 cm long; leaflet bases attenuate; apices acuminate; margins entire or sometimes slightly toothed; lower surface soft-pubescent. Inflorescence terminal, panicle, series of small cymes giving appearance of interrupted spikes. Flowers bilabiate; calyx campanulate, 2–2.5 mm long, weakly 5-toothed, densely pubescent with soft woolly hairs; corolla with long tube and spreading lips, 8–10 mm long, purplish blue to pink or white in cultivars, soft-pubescent outside, upper lip 2-lobed, lower lip 3-lobed; stamens 4, 2 longer, 2 shorter; ovary unilocular, developing up to 4 septa in fruit. Fruit a drupe, 2–4 mm long, subspherical, reddish to purplish-black.

**Parts in Commerce:** Fruit

## Identification:

- Nearly spherical to broadly elliptic, (2–)3–4 mm in diameter
- Calyx grayish, cup-shaped with 5 very shallow teeth, covering half to almost all of fruit, but brittle and often broken
- Calyx densely covered with short felted hairs; 4-celled glandular hairs with 1-celled stalks also present, though not readily seen
- Pedicel short (ca. 1 mm), grayish; twig fragments grayish
- Fruit surface purplish black
- When fractured, mesocarp tan to brownish yellow, with ridges of septa visible inside; inner surface of locules and broken surfaces of mesocarp glossy or glistening under light
- Seeds (pyrenes) up to 4, minute
- Odor warm and spicy
- Taste warm, bitter, similar to pepper or sage

**Adulterants:** Other species of *Vitex* may be substituted for *V. agnus-castus*, notably the Asian species *V. negundo* L.

(Chinese Chaste Tree), *V. rotundifolia* L.f. (Round-Leaf Chaste Tree), and *V. trifolia* L. (Simple-Leaf Chaste Tree), all of which are frequently used medicinally in their own right. Most likely substitutes, including *V. negundo*, have fruits at least 4 mm long. The fruits of less desirable species taste bland (*V. negundo* tastes bitter).

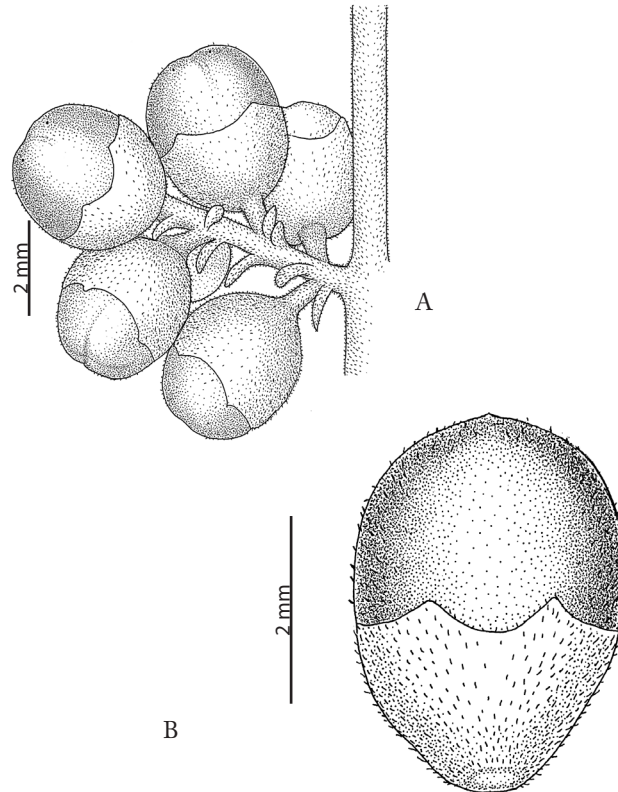
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**Figure 83:** *Vitex agnus-castus* infructescence and fruit with intact calyx.