

August 2014

The Texas Lilac Vitex or Chaste Tree

by Marilyn Cranford, Somervell County Master Gardener



One of my favorite plants I look for in spring is the vitex or chaste tree. It has beautiful purple/lavender cone-shaped blooms and exudes a fragrance that no other tree has. It's name is derived from the Latin "vicio" meaning to weave or tie up, a reference to the use of Vitex agnus-castus in basketry. It is known in both Greek and Latin as "Chaste" since in ancient times it was thought to be an aphrodisiac.

The plant is widely cultivated in warm, temperate climates for its foliage and butterfly/bee-attracting spikes of lavender flowers. I am told it will grow to a height of 12 feet or more and requires full sun or partial shade along with well-drained soil. Also, it is hearty to Zone 7.

Additionally, it is a traditional plant of Africa and has a potential to improve nutrition and support sustainable landcare. It's flowers and ripening seeds are harvested for medicinal purposes.

For anyone searching for a drought-tolerant tree, this one is for you. It is also suitable for xeriscaping, and very easily grown. So, when you happen to be out and about in our area, look for this beauty. You will find it everywhere, especially in early summer when the beautiful purple flowers are sure to catch your eye.

Here's a tip: After the tree produces its flowers, let them die, then clip them off and the tree will produce more flowers.

HAPPY GARDENING !

Let's Go To Agaritaville

By Sheryl Kleinschmidt, Master Gardener

I don't know whether or not Jimmy Buffett ever went to Agaritaville, but if he'd ever tasted the wine, I'm sure he'd return and play his six-string for us!

The first time I can remember seeing agarita (*Berberis trifoliata*), was at my great uncle's ranch down in south Texas on the Nueces River. The landscape there reminds me a lot of Somervell County except there are no hills—it's as flat as a pancake. The caliche soil there lends itself to the proliferation of agarita just as the shallow limestone soil does here.



Uncle Louis was an old-time rancher who lived off the land as much as possible. I can remember being intrigued by some of the things he would show and tell me from time to time when I visited him. Once he showed me the agarita shrubs and told me that he and his family had always collected the little, red berries by placing an old sheet under the bushes and beating them with a stick. But, it was a game of cat and mouse to get to the berries before the birds ate them all!

His family would then either make homemade jelly or wine, which they coveted. It took a lot of those tiny berries to make enough juice for either.

Agarita grows 3'-6' tall with a spread about the same size. Its foliage is bluish-green and resembles holly. Small yellow flowers begin to develop some time around February attracting honeybees and butterflies alike. The red fruit sets not long thereafter.

Being a Texas native, agarita requires little water. The deer do not like its prickly leaves, but they make a good habitat for nesting birds.

If you are fortunate enough to have agarita on your property (or a friend's) you might develop a real palate for either the wine or the jelly. Below is a recipe for agarita jelly which is stored in the freezer rather than put into a water bath and canned.

AGARITA JELLY

Gather enough berries to make two quarts. Wash thoroughly, removing any debris such as leaves, stems, etc. Put berries into a large pot and cover with water. Bring to a boil and steep until the berries begin to pop open. Remove from the heat. Using a potato masher, squash the juice out of the berries.

In another pot, bring 4 cups agarita juice to a boil. Add 3 cups of sugar, let it come to a boil again, then add one box of No-Sugar Needed Fruit Pectin. Boil for one minute, cool and pour into freezer containers. Keep frozen til needed.

"Wasted away in Agaritaville,

Searchin' for my last spoonful of jel-ly...."

Tips for August

by Linda Heideman, Somervell County Master Gardener

For the lawn and beds:

- Make sure the lawn is getting about 1-1.5 inches of water every week, watering between 2a.m.-6a.m. is ideal.



- Keep lawn mowed and landscaping weeded to prevent an infestation of chiggers.
 - Plant heat loving plants such as salvia, purslane, and portulaca.
 - Water potted plants and baskets often – twice a day on triple digit days.
- Give plants a summer boost by fertilizing throughout lawn and beds.

For the garden:

- Check the garden daily and harvest veggies regularly for the best tasting and tender vegetables.
- All month long: Sow black-eyed peas, parsley, Swiss chard, and collards.
- Beginning of the month: Sow bush and pole beans, Irish potatoes
- Middle of the month: Sow cabbage and head lettuce.
- End of the month: Sow kale, spinach, and turnip seeds.
- Turn your compost pile.

Copied from the website of Ideal Partners Landscapes, Fort Worth

Looking For Horny Toads?

Somervell County Master Gardeners will not be holding monthly CHES (Community Horticulture Education Session) programs during the summer months this year. In lieu of those programs, we would like to invite you to attend the Native Plant Society's programs on the first Tuesday of each month. The next Native Plant Society meeting will be on Tuesday, August 5th, at 6:30 pm in the Somervell County Citizens Center, 205 SW Barnard, Glen Rose. The speaker will be Nathan Rains, Wildlife Diversity Biologist, from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. He is an authority on the Texas Horned Lizard.



Everyone loves horny toads, but for many Texans, the fierce-looking, yet amiable, reptiles are only a fond childhood memory. Once common through-out most of the state, horned lizards have disappeared from many parts of their former range.

Come visit with the Prairie Rose Chapter of the NPSOT on Tuesday, August 5, 2014 to learn what the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has learned and what is being done to help preserve the horny toad and its habitat. And maybe, *just maybe*, there are things we can do to bring this childhood memory back to the present so we can share with our children and grandchildren!

This program is free and open to the public!