



Vitex agnus-castus 'Shoal Creek' is a popular variety due to its prolific and stunning blue flowers.



Vitex agnus-castus 'Montrose Purple' has numerous, large, blue-purple flowers that can persist into October.

As the summers become hotter and drier, drought-tolerant, attractive plants are increasingly sought after. Several such plants belong to *Vitex* (chaste tree), a genus of approximately 250 species ranging in distribution from tropical to temperate regions.

The species most suited to North American climates are the deciduous *V. agnus-castus* (lilac chaste tree), *V. negundo* (negundo chaste tree) and the semievergreen *V. rotundifolia* (roundleaf chaste tree). Originating in regions that stretch from the Mediterranean in the west to China in the east, these plants typically are extremely floriferous, providing an impressive display. They also attract butterflies and bees in the summer months, and sometimes deliver considerable fall interest. These plants can tolerate most conditions and do well in a variety of soils other than very wet. They not only can flourish in the hot, dry sun, but they also can survive harsh winters; although in colder areas, they normally will suffer some winter dieback. This does not affect their blooming, however, as they flower on vigorous, current season's growth.

Vitex offers a versatile way to bring some eye-catching summer color to the garden, but if you think *Vitex* is all about summer, think again. While there is no bright fall color, some chaste tree cultivars have foliage that turns an attractive

PHOTOS: DEBORAH METZGER, DR. TOMASZ ANISKO

Versatile *Vitex*

deep purple and is retained through fall and into early winter, contrasting with the display of pretty and unusual seed heads that provide the primary fall interest.

Longwood Gardens, Kennett Square, PA, began its extensive shrub trials in 1997 on a site measuring more than 7 acres. Since then, more than 1,300 taxa have been tested and judged on their potential ornamental value in the landscape. Three specimens of each shrub variety were planted. They were mulched, weeded and irrigated regularly during the first two years of establishment, then subsequently only on an as-needed basis. The shrubs also received a yearly pruning to waist height.

Throughout the year, the plants were evaluated by volunteers, students and horticultural professionals. They judged the plants on their aesthetic appeal, in particular flowering and autumn interest, as well as habit, form, stems, foliage, flowering, fruiting, environmental injury and pest or pathogen damage. Points were given for each criteria and added up to give an overall score, which included both the objective information and subjective judgments. Ratings were based on a 1.0 to 5.0 scale: 1.0 denotes an “unattractive” appearance, 2.0 denotes an “acceptable” appearance, 3.0 denotes an “attractive” appearance, 4.0 denotes a “very attractive” appearance, and 5.0 denotes the “best in class” or the most attractive plant in the group. Fourteen *Vitex* taxa were trialed and divided into five groups according to flower color, foliage and growth habits.

The first three groups are arranged by flower color (blue to purple, white, and

Chaste tree is a tough, drought-tolerant shrub that performs well in a variety of soils. Several species of Vitex were put to the test at Longwood Gardens, and the results showed this genus passed with flying colors.

pink), and all are cultivars of *V. agnus-castus*, a species native to the Mediterranean region, as well as Southwest and Central Asia. These shrubs mostly have a dense, upright habit with an open, vase shape. They feature a showy display of pretty, upright panicles of flowers that bloom in July and August.

Vitex agnus-castus ‘Alba’ has a strong architectural form that makes a bold statement in the garden.



The fourth group contains larger shrubs that are characterized by a looser, airier habit, and they include two varieties of *V. negundo*, a species native to China and India, and *V. agnus-castus* ‘Arnold’s Cutleaf’.

The last group contains the round-leaved *V. rotundifolia*, which is native to Eastern Asia, as well as two clones of the intraspecific hybrid *V. agnus-castus* × *V. rotundifolia*, developed by the Chicago Botanic Garden, Glencoe, IL, in 1997. These glaucous-leaved plants have a low growth habit and are regarded as potentially good groundcover plants.

Beautiful blues. *V. agnus-castus* ‘Shoal Creek’ (photo, page 26) was introduced in 1983 by Goodness Grows Inc., Lexington, GA. Grown from the seed of a plant that was owned by the proprietor of the former Shoal Creek Nursery, Athens, GA, it was selected for its vigorous habit, large flower

by DEBORAH METRUSTRY and DR. TOMASZ ANIŚKO



Vitex agnus-castus var. *latifolia* has clusters of flowers that are a bright blue-purple from July to October, with as many as 10 spikes on one cluster.



The clean, pure white inflorescences of *Vitex agnus-castus* 'Silver Spire' sparkle in the sunshine.

spikes and foliage, and bluer blooms. 'Shoal Creek' clearly was the best blue-flowered *V. agnus-castus* in our trials, achieving a high rating of 3.6 in summer for its prolific and stunning flowering and a 3.2 rating in October to December for its fall display of attractive seed heads.

This plant consistently has reached 5 to 6 feet in height and breadth since its second year in the trials. It is a multistemmed shrub with a good uniform, upright and fairly dense, rounded habit, which the evaluators liked.

The young stems in spring are a showy purple, turning red-brown and creating a pale, ghostly image in December. This plant makes an exuberant display of eye-catching blooms from June through August, with a particular impact in August. The attractive white or silvery gray buds appear in June, opening to lavender blue/bright purple in large, upright panicles 8 to 10 inches in length, with dense rings of flowers on each stem. The closed, white buds at the growing tip that feature open, bright blue-purple flowers at the base are striking from a distance. The seed

heads are attractive, long, interrupted spikes of small purple or red-brown fruits, which turn a pretty silvery gray and become wispy by December.

The blue-purple-flowered *V. agnus-castus* 'Montrose Purple' (photo, page 26) came a very close second; in fact, it achieved the highest rating in the group (4.0) for autumn. It was selected in the mid-1980s from a plant grown at the former Montrose Nursery, now the site of the Gardens of Montrose, Hillsborough, NC, owned by Nancy and Craufurd Goodwin. 'Montrose Purple' was chosen for its strong, vibrant color, and it performed very well in summer and even better in October when it received the highest rating of all the plants for that month.

Its overall habit is rounded and upright, but the shape is variable, becoming more irregular with age. It is similar in size to 'Shoal Creek', reaching 6 feet tall and wide in its last year in the trials. The foliage emerges in May as large, soft, gray-green or blue-green leaves with a silvery underside that is very showy in the wind. The flower buds are grayish white, opening to

large, fat, lavender or blue-purple inflorescences. Some flowers persist until October. The new seed heads are rosy and retained until pruning, and they were regarded as "very attractive."

V. agnus-castus var. *latifolia* (photo, left) also performed well. It is said to be more vigorous and hardy than the species, and while in our trials, it was not larger than many of the other blue *Vitex*; its habit was more vigorous and less tidy than the blue cultivars in this group. Its maximum height and spread was 6 by 8 feet. The growth habit is dense and more upright than the other selections. In its last two years, it became more irregular and had a less attractive shape. The leaves emerge in May, and when fully extended are larger than those of the other *Vitex*. Like 'Shoal Creek', the leaves develop a purple tint in fall. The flowers — a good blue to blue-purple — are in clusters, emerging in July and reaching full bloom by the end of the month. Flowering lasts into October, and the inflorescences are very similar to 'Shoal Creek' with as many as 10 bright blue-purple spikes on one cluster.

V. agnus-castus var. *latifolia* received a rating of 2.8 for summer and 3.3 for fall.

The overall display of *V. agnus-castus* var. *latifolia* is not as impressive as that of 'Shoal Creek'. The seed heads are large and appealing, and the shrub has a heavy fruit set, with light cranberry-colored fruit spikes developing in October. In November and December, the seed heads were gray and considered "attractive."

V. agnus-castus 'Abbeville Blue' is a cultivar introduced by Louisiana Nursery, Opelousas, LA, and found in a garden in Abbeville, LA.

It was selected in the early 1990s for its blue flowers and long bloom time. Many evaluators thought this was the best blue chaste tree in the trials. Although the flower clusters are larger than those of other *Vitex*, the variable habit and leggy,

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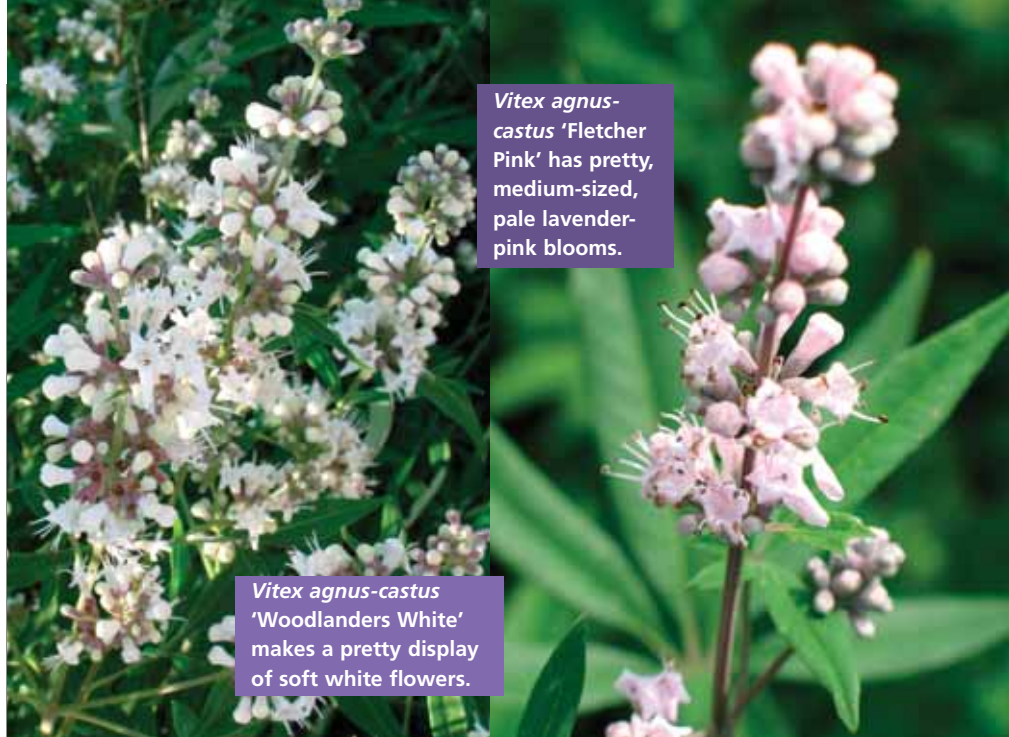
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Vitex agnus-castus 'Fletcher Pink' has pretty, medium-sized, pale lavender-pink blooms.

Vitex agnus-castus 'Woodlanders White' makes a pretty display of soft white flowers.

sparse growth brought the ratings of this plant down. The fall leaves became shriveled and unattractive, negating the positive effect of the smoky, finely textured seed heads. This shrub received a "best in class" rating in July, but it scored much lower in other months than all the other blue-flowered cultivars of *V. agnus-castus*.

Sparkly whites. *V. agnus-castus* 'Alba' (photo, page 27) is an old selection, dating back to the 17th century. It is a large shrub with a much more defined shape than all the other *Vitex* in the trials.

'Alba' kept a strong, rounded and dense shape throughout the year, reaching a size of 6 feet tall and wide in its final year. Leaves emerge in May, a little earlier than those of the blue-flowered cultivars. The flower buds begin developing in June, with full bloom from July to August and some flowering persisting into October. The large panicles are distinctly erect, giving a candle-like effect, and they are creamy white, though they can appear greenish white. The fruit set is very heavy; no other *Vitex* has fruits so dense and conspicuous. The yellow-green fruit spikes continue the candle-like effect into fall and winter, and by December, only the long, silver seed heads remained.

The ratings for this plant were relatively high, scoring "attractive" in July (3.9) and December (3.8).

V. agnus-castus 'Silver Spire' (photo, page 28) is quite different from 'Alba'. Unlike 'Alba', which is a dense, round shrub, 'Silver Spire' is a fountain of arching branches. This is another large shrub, reaching as tall as 8 feet in a single season after being cut back.

The flower spikes are very long (up to

12 inches), appealing and a cleaner, purer white than 'Alba', although one plant reverted to lavender flowers. The flowers are in bud until July, then bloom heavily throughout August. The flower panicles are less upright than those of 'Alba', adding to the overall arching shape of the plant. The seed heads are attractive, having fruit in drooping spikes, and they become pendulous and silvery in winter. They can be retained until the plant is cut back in spring.

Ratings were high for July through September (3.2) and November (4.0), and 'Silver Spire' received a "best in class" rating for both July and August.

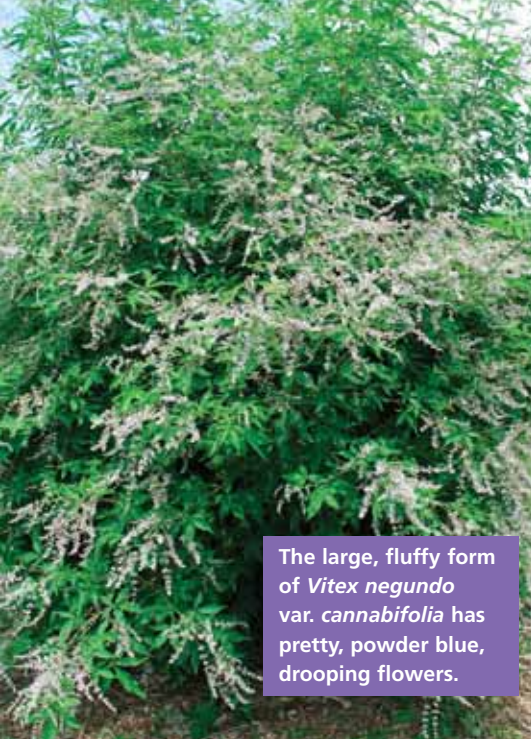
V. agnus-castus 'Woodlanders White' (photo, above left) was selected in the 1990s for its white blooms by Woodlanders Inc., Aiken, SC. We chose to use the name 'Woodlanders White' for this plant because it was received as 'White' from Woodlanders nursery, but this is not a valid cultivar name.

'Woodlanders White' differs from 'Silver Spire' because of its smaller panicles, although they appear long and linear against the size of the plant, which is smaller than the other *V. agnus-castus* varieties. It became rather twiggy and uneven during its years in the trials and received much lower overall ratings than both 'Alba' and 'Silver Spire'.

Its highest performing months are July (2.8), when its white flowers make a pretty display, and October (3.0), for its attractive seed heads.

Pretty pinks. *V. agnus-castus* 'Fletcher Pink' (photo, above right) was another introduction by Louisiana Nursery, selected for its beautiful, pale pink,

PHOTOS: DEBORAH METZGER



The large, fluffy form of *Vitex negundo* var. *cannabifolia* has pretty, powder blue, drooping flowers.

medium-sized blooms, which are smaller than those of 'Abbeville Blue'. It was named after Dr. Ellis Fletcher, a former professor of horticulture at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette.

Of the two pink cultivars in this group, 'Fletcher Pink' clearly was the winning plant; the other pink cultivar, 'Blushing Spires', received reasonable ratings. 'Blushing Spires' did not survive the climate at Longwood Gardens, and by July 2004, all specimens of this plant had failed.

'Fletcher Pink' is a compact, rounded shrub that reached 6 feet tall and wide in its final year in the trials. It has an upright, vase shape with a round, neat look, although its form is not as symmetrical as some of the other *Vitex* selections. The foliage was considered beautiful by the evaluators, and in October, the youngest leaves had a purple tinge. The flower buds begin opening in July and flowering continues into October, although the heaviest blooming is finished by August. The flower buds open to a pale pink, also described as "very pale lavender" and "muddy white." The inflorescences are upright panicles, generally smaller than those of 'Silver Spire' and 'Shoal Creek'. The seed are in clumps, and by September, they have an attractive, reddish cast in erect spikes. In December, a few gray-black seed heads remain.

'Fletcher Pink' was described as "one of the nicest *Vitex* in the field," and it received a rating of "very attractive" for September and June.

Billowy lavender and feathery foliage. *V. negundo* var. *cannabifolia* (photo, above) derives its name from the shape of its leaves, which resemble those of

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Vitex agnus-castus 'Arnold's Cutleaf' has a loose, soft form with fern-like foliage and feathery, lavender flowers.



Vitex negundo var. *heterophylla* has delicate flowers that vary from lavender blue to white.

Cannabis sativa (hemp). In the group, this shrub had the highest ratings for spring, summer and winter. It was one of the largest shrubs in the trials, in some years reaching a height and spread of approximately 10 feet. It has a pleasingly loose and relaxed habit and is light in appearance despite its dense growth. Most evaluators thought its pendulous branching and overall arching or weeping form were attractive and exuberant features.

The new stems are silver to light tan, becoming darker throughout the season and finally progressing to gray, creating a beautiful pale, ghost-like effect. The luscious-looking foliage has long, lobed or serrated leaflets. The flower buds begin to emerge in mid-June, becoming soft, fine, blue, upright panicles of flowers. The panicles later become more drooping or weeping. The powder blue flower spikes are loose and pendulous, covering the plant and giving it a mist-like appearance with a fine, feathery texture.

Ratings for summer were high, and many felt the plant was extremely pretty. This shrub scored "best in class" ratings for both July and August. Peak flowering occurs in July and August, with some flowers lasting into October. The seed heads show red color in fall and exhibit fine texture until the following year. This plant was given a rating of "attractive" for autumn.

Whereas *V. negundo* var. *cannabifolia* outshone the others in this group during spring and summer, *V. agnus-castus* 'Arnold's Cutleaf' (photo, above left) had the highest rating for autumn.

'Arnold's Cutleaf' is a large shrub, reaching 10 feet in height and spread by mid-July. Its habit is upright but airy, wild-looking and slightly spreading. The foliage, which emerges in May, is very

distinctive. A lighter green than other *V. agnus-castus* selections, it has longer, more elegant leaflets that are deeply dissected and fern-like, giving them a fine and feathery texture, and the underside is very showy in the wind. Flowering begins at the end of June and early July and reaches full bloom in August, with some blooms lasting into October. The inflorescences are smaller than those of *V. negundo* var. *cannabifolia* and are blue-purple or lavender in color. Open, lax and airy, they combine well with the feathery foliage, and when in full bloom, the flowers appear as a lavender mist covering the plant.

'Arnold's Cutleaf' received "best in class" ratings for both July and September and was considered handsome. The fruits appear in small, drooping clusters, but do not make a showy display until later in fall when they turn silver and are very attractive.

V. negundo var. *heterophylla* (photo, above right) is another chaste tree with a large, billowy form, reaching up to 8 feet tall and wide. It has a good, open, vase shape that the evaluators liked. It is a little taller than it is wide, has a fine presence — even without flowers — and gives an attractive, see-through effect with foliage that is interesting and pretty.

The new leaves emerge in May and are deeply serrated, described by evaluators as "threadleaf" and "wispy." The flowers emerge in June. Whereas one of our plants had near-white flowers, the other two were pale blue to lavender, and the evaluators liked the dainty inflorescences. Peak blooming is in July and August, but the whole shrub is never in bloom at once, resulting in a more muted display. The silver, drooping seed heads are attractive, especially after a heavy fruit set,

and they can persist until spring. This plant scored quite well in summer and received a "best in class" rating in July from one evaluator.


Gorgeous groundcovers. This group of plants is quite different than the others already described. They have a different form than the other *Vitex* varieties, as well as a more glaucous, round, entire leaf shape. This group did not receive as high ratings as the other *Vitex* tested, but, because they are low-growing with attractive foliage, they are potentially good groundcover plants.

While *V. rotundifolia* ultimately failed, it was given reasonably high ratings within this group. Horticultural literature states it is well-adapted to harsh conditions; however, it suffered severe winter dieback during our trials. It ultimately survived three winters, but in the end it finally succumbed to winter temperatures and died.


V. rotundifolia is very low-growing, reaching only 2 to 3 feet tall and 4 to 5 feet wide in its final year in the trials. Its growth habit is irregular and spreading. The stems are a distinctive maroon to purple, dark brown and exfoliating in summer, and they turn dusty gray by October. The maroon stands out very well against the attractive eucalyptic, gray-green leaves. The leaves are oval and quite small, reaching only 1 to 2 inches long. The flowers, which open in August, are clear lavender blue and appear as 1-inch-long inflorescences on the tips of the shoots; they are much smaller than those of the other *Vitex* selections.

V. rotundifolia received ratings of "attractive" in summer for its bloom and habit, as well as "best in class" in October from one evaluator.

V. agnus-castus × *V. rotundifolia* was de-



The clear blue flowers of *Vitex agnus-castus* × *V. rotundifolia* Clone 1 complement the interesting, glaucous, white-edged foliage and dark maroon stems.



The foliage of *Vitex agnus-castus* × *V. rotundifolia* Clone 2 is more lime green than that of Clone 1, and it has similar, attractive, clear blue flowers.

veloped at the Chicago Botanic Garden in the hope that the hardiness of *V. agnus-castus* would transfer to this hybrid. Because both clones survived the harsh winter that killed the *V. rotundifolia*, this may indeed be the case.

In appearance, these plants are more like *V. rotundifolia* than *V. agnus-castus*. The stems of both clones have the attractive maroon-purple of *V. rotundifolia*, and this contrasts well with the attractive gray-green foliage. The leaves of the first clone (photo, above left) are distinctively wider and more silver than those of the second clone (photo, above right), which are more of a lime green. The foliage of both plants was described as “lush” and “attractive.” Both clones are larger than *V. rotundifolia*, growing to approximately 4 to 5 feet tall, and have an open and spreading habit.

Flowering is quite late; the small inflorescences do not fully open until late July or August. Flowers were described as “light to mid-blue” and “purple.” One evaluator said the flowers had a “good, clear blue” color. Flowers continue to bloom into October. The 2-inch, white fruit spikes were considered attractive when new; however, they thin out and turn gray throughout the season. Dieback was noted in both plants each year, and evaluators felt more pruning would be beneficial to the overall health and shape of the plants.

Both received a “best in class” rating from one evaluator in October, though apart from this score, the highest ratings were not very high, with “acceptable” to “attractive” as the top scores.

Vitex is a tough plant that endures tough weather conditions. It thrives in hot

sun and easily can tolerate drought. The plants that survived our trials are hardy in Zone 6. The top growth was pruned to waist height in early spring of each year. This was found to be the optimum pruning height to achieve good vigor, an attractive shape and a manageable size. While not fertilized or watered after the establishment phase in our trials, this group of plants also is known to respond well to regular irrigation and feeding. None of our shrubs suffered any pest damage, and, according to horticultural literature, there are no significant pests or pathogens that threaten them.

V. rotundifolia is said to be salt-tolerant, and given the similarity in characteristics between it and *V. agnus-castus* × *V. rotundifolia*, it seems likely the hybrid also would be tolerant of salt. Further south, *V. agnus-castus*, if allowed to grow without pruning, can become a significant tree, reaching a height and spread of more than 20 feet.

While some of our evaluators compared its flowers to *Buddleja*, and there is no doubt there are similarities, *Vitex* can look very attractive growing next to a *Buddleja* of a slightly different color. Chaste tree is a good shrub for a border, and because it is so late to leaf out, it can be perfect for underplantings with early to late-spring bulbs followed by early summer perennials.

It should be noted the late-winter and spring structure of many of the *Vitex* cultivars were not regarded as attractive. One way around this would be to devise a more creative and systematic approach to their annual pruning by creating an archi-

Vitex offers a versatile way to bring some eye-catching summer color to the garden, but if you think *Vitex* is all about summer, think again.

tectural main structure to prune back to each year. Alternatively, one could prune the chaste tree to the ground and treat it as a cutback shrub in a perennial or mixed border. Another option would be to grow an early-flowering vine, such as *Clematis alpina*, through the chaste tree’s bare branches. With its very distinctive shape, the cultivar ‘Alba’ would add good architectural structure to a border, and it could make an informal hedge.

Colorwise, there is a *Vitex* for almost every situation. Stylewise, it would fit admirably into any border, from the formal to the naturalistic garden, and there even is one for a seaside site. It is easy to grow and is as tough as old boots.

For a spectacular blue display from June to August, choose ‘Shoal Creek’. For white contrast in the summer and good structure, you could do no better than ‘Alba’, which will make an architectural statement in your garden. If you prefer a gentler show, ‘Fletcher Pink’ would be happy to oblige with its delicate blooms lasting from July through October. All of these cultivars give another display from fall to early winter with seed heads ranging from red and rosy to silver and ghost-like.

For a more informal and luscious exhibit, *V. negundo* var. *cannabifolia* will provide a large, loose and misty display. An abundance of lavender flowers on arching branches give a soft and relaxed feel, and bees love it, too. It, too, does well in the fall with attractive red fruits, which can persist into late winter. If autumn splendor is what you’re really after, then ‘Arnold’s Cutleaf’ is the one for you.

And if you live near the sea and desperately want a *Vitex*, wait patiently for the Chicago Botanic Garden to introduce its hybrid *V. agnus-castus* × *V. rotundifolia*, which will give a show of zingy blue flowers and luscious foliage throughout the summer, as well as a fabulous display of white fruit in the fall.

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