**Vitex agnus-castus**  
[VY-teks AG-nus KAS-tus]

**Family:** Verbenaceae

**Names:** Agnus castus, monk’s pepper, Abraham’s balm, chaste lamb tree, safe tree, Indian spice, wild pepper; Aceitunillo, Uvalama, Ahuilote (Spanish); Aghnos, Alighariá (Greek)

**Description:** A deciduous, aromatic tree growing to 22 feet with palm shaped leaves and small lilac flowers in dense clusters to 6 inches followed by little red-black fruits. The leaves are divided into 5-7 leaflets to 4 inches, dark green with a gray underside. It blooms from July to August. The entire plant is aromatic, especially the flowers and fruits.

**Cultivation:** Native to the Mediterranean region and western Asia. It is cultivated in subtropical areas around the world, and has become naturalized in many regions. It is a perennial to Zone 6 (needing mulch in zone 5). It is grown from seed in spring or autumn. For best seed germination prefers soil temperatures of 60-70F in average, well-drained dry soil. Very drought tolerant. Soil pH of 5.5-8.5. Full sun or partial shade. Can also be propagated by cutting or layering from young woody cuttings. A dip in a rooting hormone and misting cuttings is suggested for optimum propagation. Bottom heat also helps. Cuttings taken once flowering starts do not take as easily. Plant on 6-8 foot centers with a small amount of balanced slow release fertilizer. Prune back old growth in the late winter since leaves will sprout on new growth. Deer proof shrub. The ripe berries are collected in autumn. The berries are already dry on the plant and can just be stripped with the fingers. To process clean out the few leaves and stems that might be included.

**History:** Vitex was well known in ancient times and featured in Home’s the *Iliad* as a symbol of chastity capable of warding off evil. *Angus* means “lamb” and *castus* mean “chaste”. As the name “chaste tree” implies, it was thought to reduce sexual desire, and traditionally was chewed by monks to reduce unwanted libido. Athenian women placed the leaves in the beds of virgins during the feast of the harvest goddess, Ceres, and are reported to have sometimes put them in their husband’s beds. The reputation for chastity continued into the Middle Ages when monks sprinkled the ground wild peppers liberally on their food to ensure continued chastity. It soon also became known as “monk’s pepper.” Italians still follow the old custom of strewing the flowers on the ground in front of novices as they enter the monastery or convent. In the 13th century, two Arabic medical formularies mentioned chaste tree to treat epilepsy and even insanity. The seeds are still sold today in Egyptian bazaars to calm hysteria.
Constituents: iridoid glycosides which include aucin, aucubin and agnoside; flavonoids including fasticin, isovitexin, casticin and orientin, castin, tridoglycoside agnuside, essential oil, fatty oil

Properties: emmenagogue, vulnerary, normalizes female hormonal balance

Energetics: sweet, bitter, neutral

Meridians/Organs affected: liver, spleen

Medicinal Uses: Back in the 17th century, herbalist Gerard wrote that the seeds and leaves helped with pain and inflammation of the uterus. The hormonelike substances found in the seeds help to correct female hormonal imbalances, such as those that can occur during menopause, premenstrual syndrome, or menstruation, and also help dissolve fibroids and cysts. German researchers suggest the berries increase production of luteinizing hormone and prolactin. Another study adds the increase of the hormone progesterone to the list. The seeds do stimulate mother’s milk flow as shown in a clinical study when 100 nursing mothers taking chasteberry seeds were compared to those who were not. Christopher Hobbs suggests its use during the first 3 months only of pregnancy to help prevent miscarriage and, with ginger, to allay morning sickness. Chaste berries can help regulate periods when there is excessive or too frequent bleeding. It also reestablishes normal ovulation after contraceptive pills have been used. In women without ovaries, chasteberry appears to lessen extremes of hormonal imbalance, perhaps through indirect effects on the endocrine system, liver and circulation. Women with PMS with significant depression should probably steer clear of chasteberry. Some research suggests that PMS with depression is caused by excess progesterone, and chasteberry is said to raise progesterone levels. Chasteberry may help some women trying to conceive if infertility is due to low progesterone levels. Most of the research has been done on a chaste berry extract called Agnolyt. When 53 women with excessive bleeding and short menstrual cycles were given this product, 65% showed improvement and about 47% were cured. Those over age 20 experienced the most improvements. Other studies with Agnolyt found the chaste berry helps control acne in both young women and young men.

Remedies:
Erratic Menstrual Cycle: 4 oz chasteberry seed extract, 3 oz lady’s mantle herb extract, 2 oz blue cohosh root extract, 1 oz nettle leaf extract. Take 1 tsp in 1 cup water in the morning and evening.

Hot Flashes and Night Sweats: 3 oz chasteberry seed extract, 2 oz motherwort herb extract, 2 oz hawthorn flower, leaf, berry extract, 2 oz yarrow flower extract, 1 oz dong quai root extract. Combine and every 10 minutes take one dropper or ¼ tsp diluted in ¼ cup of room temperature water to stop problem. For permanent improvement, take 1 teaspoon 3 times a day for 2 weeks, then take a few days off and repeat for another two weeks.

Toxicity: Chaste berry may interfere with progesterone-containing medications. Also, it can delay the onset of menstruation a few days.

Ritual Uses: Herb of the Moon and Pluto. The leaves were used ritually to invoke Ceres. The seeds may be used to invoke the maiden virginal aspect of the Goddess and may also be used to move a priestess into the mysteries of the crone.

Other Uses: The leaves, roots or seeds with alum produce yellow dye.

References:
Medicinal Herbs in the Garden, Field and Marketplace, Lee Sturdivant and Tim Blakley, 1999; San Juan Naturals; ISBN: 0-9621635-7-0
Resources:
Companion Plants, www.companionplants.com
Crimson Sage, http://www.crimson-sage.com
Plants
The Rosemary House, www.therosemaryhouse.com
tincture
Wood Violet Herb Farm, www.woodvioletherbfarm.com plants