**RED ROOT**

*Ceanothus velutinus*

[see-an-OH-thus vel-oo-TEE-nus]

**Family:** Rhamnaceae

**Names:** Snowbrush, mountain balm, sticky laurel, buckbrush, wild lilac, greasewood, tobacco brush, deerbrush, lilac bush, Oregon tea tree, seet birch

**Description:** It is a rounded, dark green bush sometimes 3 feet tall in the center, often only a foot in height, and formed of many short, thick stems covered with large, generally sticky leaves. Plants may be spread out to 10 feet in width, but most plants in a stand will be from 2 t 3 feet in diameter. Like most Ceanothus species, the oval leaves have three or five primary veins running from tip to tip, and well-delineated secondary veins branching out from them; the upper surface may be so covered with shiny resin that this is not always apparent. The underside is lighter, the stems are sticky, and the big, leathery leaves often tend to stand upright, somewhat vertical to the ground. The flowers are large oval clusters of small, snow-white blossoms, very white against the dark green, varnished leaves; they bloom from late spring to fall, depending on the rain and heat.

The flowers are aromatic, and the leaves have a strong, pleasant, spicy taste. The plant is not spined. Snowbrush grows abundantly in poor, gravelly soils, on rocky or semi-barren slopes and flats which offer full sunshine. Evergreen and flowers in June

**Cultivation:** Prefers a warm sunny position but tolerates light shade. Tolerates some lime, but will not succeed on shallow chalk. Plants dislike root disturbance, they should be planted out into their permanent positions while still small. Dislikes heavy pruning, it is best not to cut out any wood thicker than a pencil. Plants flower on the previous year's growth, if any pruning is necessary it is best carried out immediately after flowering has finished. Constant pruning to keep a plant small can shorten its life. Fast growing, it flowers well when young, often in its second year from seed.

The seed is best sown as soon as it is ripe in a cold frame. Stored seed should be pre-soaked for 12 hours in warm water and then given 1 - 3 months stratification at 34°F. Germination usually takes place within 1 - 2 months at 68°F. Seeds have considerable longevity, some that have been in the soil for 200 years or more have germinated. The seed is ejected from its capsule with some force when fully ripe, timing the collection of seed can be difficult because unless collected just prior to dehiscence the seed is difficult to extract and rarely germinates satisfactorily. Prick out the seedlings into individual pots as soon as they are large enough to handle. Grow them on in the greenhouse for at least their first winter and plant them out into their permanent positions in late spring or early summer. Cuttings of half-ripe wood, taken at a node, July/August in a frame. Cuttings of mature wood of the current year's growth, 7 - 12 cm with a heel, October in
a cold frame. The roots are quite brittle and it is best to pot up the callused cuttings in spring, just before the roots break.

The roots are usually best gathered from midsummer to mid-winter. The most desirable roots have a reddish or wine-colored bark. The inner wood varies from cream-colored to reddish purple. If the wood has at least some reddish color, use it with the bark. If the main taproots have some color in the wood, use all the side roots as well, discarding the stems at the level that tanroot bark changes to green stem bark. The roots are tough and intractable. Fresh roots are the easiest to work with. The dried root and bark are stable for at least two years. The leaves are good for up to a year.

**Properties:** Analgesic; Antirheumatic; Febrifuge; Poultice

**Constituents:** The leaves contain nonacosane, 1-hexacosanol, velutin, and traces of caffeine have been reported. The root and bark contain betulinic acid, ceanothine, ceanothamine, integerrissine, integerrinine, integerrine, and americine. Other constituents include tannins, phlobaphenes, resins, and oils with succinic, oxalic, malonic, malic, orthophosphoric, and pyrophosphoric acids.

**Medicinal Uses:** Red root is an astringent to membranes and is a good gargle and mouthwash for a sore throat or sores in the mouth. An infusion of the leaves has been used in the treatment of coughs and fevers. A decoction of the leaves and stems has been used both internally and externally in the treatment of dull pains, rheumatism etc. The leaves contain saponins and have been used as a skin wash that is also deodorant and can destroy some parasites. The tops were used in a bath to prevent diaper rash or to wash sores or eczema by the Okanagan-Coville. The Thompson used a decoction of branches or leaves as a wash for rheumatism, arthritis, and dull body pains, or in a general wash for bathing. A poultice of the dried powdered leaves has been used as a baby powder for treating diaper rash etc.

**Culinary Uses:** To make an excellent drink having the color and flavor of an Oriental tea, pick the leaves when the flowers are in bloom, and dry thoroughly. Fresh leaves can be steeped for a longer time to get a reasonably good drink. Finely crumble the dried leaves and use them like tea, adding a squeeze of lemon or a touch of mint. Alternatively, dry the creamy white flowers and brew a tasty tea by steeping a heaped teaspoon of these in two cups of boiling water.

**Cosmetic Uses:** All parts of the plant are rich in saponins which when crushed and mixed with water produce a good lather which is an effective and gentle soap. This soap is very good at removing dirt, though it does not remove oils very well. This means that when used on the skin it will not remove the natural body oils, but nor will it remove engine oil etc. The flowers are a very good source and when used as a body soap they leave behind a pleasant perfume on the skin. Traditionally plant tops and leaves were used as a hair wash for dandruff.

**Other Uses:** Red root flowers have been used as an insecticide to kill bedbugs.

**References:**
- Plants for a Future Database

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