TEA PARTY AMERICAN STYLE

Ceanothus is a large and complex genus of strictly North American shrubs with about fifty-five species spread across temperate regions of the continent. The majority of species occur in the West and the bulk of these take root in California, with some forty-six species (about thirty of which are California endemics) and numerous varieties and hybrids. The length and breadth of the Sierra Nevada Range is home to roughly ten species of ***Ceanothus,*** though the numerous mountain ranges of the Great Basin harbor only two, ***C. velutinus***, known as tobacco brush or snow brush, and ***C. martinii***, Utah Ceanothus. Tobacco brush is also the dominant ***Ceanothus*** found in our part of the Eastern Sierra, though several other species are common. Five (or six) species of ***Ceanothus*** occur in Nevada: ***Ceanothus velutinus, C. cordulatus, C. martinii, C. prostratus, C. greggii var. perplexans*** and ***C. greggii var. vestitus;*** the last two taxa, both restricted to the southern one-third of the state, have been redefined as distinct species in the 2nd edition of the Jepson Manual published in 2012. They are now called ***C. perplexans*** and ***C. vestitus***. ***Ceanothus*** is placed in the buckthorn family, **Rhamnaceae**. Some of the other common names applied to members of this genus are deer brush, buck brush, California lilac, whitethorn, and (New) Jersey tea.

From an ecological perspective, tobacco brush (***Ceanothus velutinus***) is of great importance as a burn site colonizer, soil stabilizer, and as wildlife habitat. The roots of this shrub (and all ***Ceanothus*** species) bear nodules housing actinomycetes, a diverse group of filamentous bacteria that fix elemental atmospheric nitrogen into nitrogenous compounds usable by plants. This symbiotic relationship benefits not only the host plant but numerous other species as the nitrogen is spread throughout the soil by the movement of water.

The dried leaves of some species of ***Ceanothus*** are valued as a black tea substitute. Jersey tea, ***C. americanus***, a species ranging over the eastern half of the U.S. and Canada, was considered a fine black tea replacement by American Colonials. In a round-about way, this plant may have bolstered the American Revolution: Without a plentiful supply of Jersey tea leaves to brew in the stead of their beloved English tea, the colonists may not have been willing to cut off their European supply by hosting the Boston Tea Party. Perhaps it would be more fitting for our emblematic eagle to clutch a Jersey tea branch rather than an olive branch in its right talon.

In late spring to early summer, tobacco brush blooms in prodigious clusters of white, sweetly (some say sickeningly) fragrant flowers. When rubbed in water, especially warm water, these blossoms produce a mild, cleansing lather which is very gentle on the skin and hair. The flowers can also be dried and stored for later use as a perfumed herbal "soap". To a greater or lesser extent, the blossoms of all species of ***Ceanothus*** can be used in this same way. The small, three-horned fruits typical of the genus, when still immature and soft, also make a fine "soap". As the name implies, the dried leaves of tobacco brush, and probably other species of ***Ceanothus***, were used as a component in herbal smoking mixtures, both by American Indians and Euro-American trappers and explorers.

One other species that commands attention in our region of the Eastern Sierra is ***C. prostratus***, commonly known as mahala mats. This diminutive though broadly spreading ground cover has purple flowers and, at first glance, doesn't look like it belongs in the same genus. However, closer inspection of the flower and fruit dispels any doubt that it isn't a ***Ceanothus***.

In the world of herbal medicine, all plants in the genus ***Ceanothus*** are considered to have similar properties and are lumped together under the common name of **red root.** The primary use of red root is as a lymphatic stimulant and tonic. The deep, red-wine color of the inner bark of the root, harvested in late summer through early spring, is considered to be the most bioactively potent portion of the plant. Michael Moore, one of the preeminent modern North American herbalists, explains its complex tonic action in terms of blood proteins, red blood cells, and increased efficiency of exchange between blood and lymph. Tincture of the root bark is also considered to be an excellent spleen tonic. Red root is classified as an astringent. This is probably the main quality that makes it effective in stemming the flow of nosebleeds, excess menstrual bleeding, bleeding hemorrhoids and ulcers, and in shrinking inflamed lymphatic tissue, as in mild tonsillitis.

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