

## *Vitex agnus-castus*—Chaste Tree

Among the late summer and fall blooming trees on Victoria Avenue are the Chaste Trees—*Vitex agnus-castus*. The genus *Vitex* consists of approximately 100 species, principally from tropical and subtropical regions of the world. The dense, terminal spikes of lavender blue flowers against a background of densely green foliage are truly striking. The flowering time of this species is not in synchrony with other plants adapted to our Mediterranean climate. During the wet winter and early spring month when other trees are flowering and leafing out, this deciduous tree lacks foliage and looks lifeless. When other trees are fruiting, this tree is leafing out. And finally in the dead of summer when heat is most intense and the soil is driest, it flowers.

*Vitex agnus-castus* is a shrub or single- or multi-stemmed small tree, 10-25 feet tall with approximately equal spread. The crown is rounded, dense and low-branched. The leaves are palmately compound with 5-7 elongate leaflets, the center-most of which is the largest. The leaflets are medium to dark green above, grayish and hairy on the underside and are strongly aromatic with a minty smell. The small flowers are tubular with flaring lips and a soft deep blue-violet color. Their attractiveness resides in their density in the inflorescence. The fruit is a small drupe (one seeded fleshy fruit) and these are persistent on the tree until the next season.

The common name of this tree seems to have come from the notion that the extracts from fruits and leaves act as a sexual suppressant. This idea dates back to ancient times. The Roman naturalist, Pliny wrote that Athenian women used it to keep chaste during their annual worship of the Greek goddess of harvests. Even now, if you do a Google search using “vitex” you will find many herbal sites touting its efficacy in alleviating various sexual problems in both men and women.

Once established, the Chaste tree has few horticultural requirements in the Southern California landscape. It requires moderate moisture, well-drained soil, full sun and

summer heat for maximum flowering. It is moderately drought tolerant., although it grows much more luxuriantly in coastal areas.

These trees can be seen in the median strip in two places on Victoria Avenue: between Adams and Jefferson and between Horace and Lincoln.

