

Herb of the Week



Botanical name: Ceanothus spp. (all red root species are usable as long as the root bark and inner pith is reddish-purple) (ex. *Ceanothus americanus*)

Common name: Red Root, New Jersey Tea, California Lilac, Lilac Bush, Buck Brush

Family: Rhamnaceae

Key Words: “Shrubs or small trees with visibly three-parted capsules or berries”

Habitat and Range: Native to North America. The common species in Colorado is *Ceanothus fendleri*. *C. americanus*, known for its medicinal properties, is found in eastern North America. *C. cuneatus* (buckbrush), *C. integerrimus* (deerbrush), and *C. velutinus* (tobacco brush) are also used medicinally, and can be used interchangeably and generally known as red root. Usually found in dry to occasionally moist woods, hillsides, rock cliffs, ravines and fields. Some species grow in arid places and live in association with a soil fungus that provides the roots with nitrogen. Z4-8

Botanical description: Perennial, evergreen and deciduous shrubs. There are approximately 50-60 species of *Ceanothus* growing across North America (mainly western in distribution), from coast to coast, as far north as southern Canada, as far south as Guatemala, on the coast, and high as 9,000 feet above sea level. Semi-thorny ground cover. Some grow to be small trees, other are short shrubs. The fragrant clusters of flowers are most often white, however, they range from blue to lavender to white and pink, and grow in small lilac-like inflorescence. Leaves are dark green, and tough. The seed pods (half the size of a pea, triangular) are a brilliant dark reddish color, like the tincture made from the roots. The woody root bark is deep red, and the inner root is creamy tan colored.

C. americanus- small, deciduous shrub with tough, dark red roots and ovate leaves, to 10cm (4in) long. Dense, long-stalked panicles of tiny, off-white flowers appear in summer, followed by triangular seed pods. Native to eastern C and SE U.S., and S Canada. Up to 1 meter (3 ft) and 45 cm (18 inches) wide.

Part Used: Root bark. (If the inner bark has a reddish color, it can be used as well)

Cultivation: Well-drained soil in sun. Dislikes alkaline conditions, but tolerates poor, dry soils. Cut back to within 8-10cm (3-4 inches) of the previous season’s growth in the spring. Scale insects may attack stems. Dislikes disturbance. Propagate by seed sown in autumn; by semi-ripe cuttings in summer.

Harvesting and Processing: Harvest the root from mid-summer to mid-winter when the reddish color is most pronounced (the most potent root has a slight pinkish tinge in the core). If you are harvesting it yourself, it is best to process the root fresh, as it becomes quite hard to process once dried. If you are buying them in herbal commerce, you can generally find the root cut and sifted or ground, which are both fine for making tinctures from. Leaves are gathered during the flowering period and dried.

Therapeutic Preparation: Fresh root tincture (1:2, 65%), dry root tincture (1:5, 50%), decoction or cold infusion (1 oz. dried herb steeped overnight in a quart of water)

Dosage: 30-60 drops tincture up to 4x a day; cold infusion 2-4 oz per dose

Energetics: Astringent, drying, sweet

Medicinal Actions: Astringent, lymphagogue, expectorant, anti-spasmodic

Indications:

-Primary for the lymph system to process waste cells very quickly; weak, water-logged lymph and tissue; swollen glands, lymphatic stagnation, edema, watery cysts, pelvic congestion, swollen prostate

-Enlarged, inflamed spleen, melancholy; subacute, chronic, or secondary hepatitis or malaria

-Mononucleosis, especially with much lymphatic swelling

-Lymph glands: chronic swelling under jaw or in the groin

-frontal headache

-thin discharge from the sinuses

-watery earlobe cysts

-acute pharyngitis (gargle); swollen sore throat; acute tonsillitis (mix tincture with saliva in the mouth and allow it to dribble down the throat onto affected area- 30 drops 3-6x day; cold infusion, sip a quart through the day)

-tooth abscesses and mouth sores (mouthwash) and an effective astringent for inflammations of the throat and mouth; tongue enlargement, swollen with a dirty white or yellow coating

-blood: slow coagulation, or thick, viscous, red blood cell clumping; nose bleeds

-Abnormal uterine bleeding

-Hemorrhoids

-Digestion: loss of appetite, general weakness, anemia, diarrhea, weakness, lack of assimilation

-Women: acute mastitis, fibrocystic breasts, water-filled breast or ovarian cysts

-Has reported to increase T-cell count

Contraindications: Avoid during pregnancy. Best to avoid if you are taking medications that affect blood clotting. According to Michael Moore, "red root is for healthy people under stress, not for sick folks under treatment."

Other Uses: Flowers and fruits contain saponin and can be used for a mild soap. Root can be used as a red dye. Fixes nitrogen in the soil. Native Americans used it externally in treating skin cancer and venereal sores. It was used as a substitute for tea in the American Revolution. Leaves are used as a caffeine-free tea substitute.