

# Inland Ceanothus

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Inland ceanothus, *Ceanothus herbaceous*, is a small shrub that grows from Texas northward into the Great Plains. There are several species of *Ceanothus* found across the entire United States, most include a secondary name of Jersey tea. This name comes from Native American tribes who taught the early settlers to use the dried leaves of inland ceanothus for a medicinal drink. It is sometimes called redroot due to the boiled roots producing a red dye.

This plant grows as an erect shrub with slender, upright, reddish branches that may have a slight amount of pubescence, reaching a height of 24 to 36 inches with a spread of about 24 inches. Older twigs are dark gray. Leaves are alternate, deciduous, widest at the middle with both ends tapering to a point. The margins of each leaf have small teeth with a glandular bump on tip of teeth. The leaves are  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 1 inch in width and  $\frac{3}{4}$  to  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches in length showing three veins coming together at the base. Upper surface of the leaves are dull green and shiny, while lower is paler and either smooth or with a few hairs on the veins. Flowers appearing like an umbrella on the tips of current years twigs. White flowers are in clusters on flower stalks up to 2 inches in length, each flower with five tiny petals. Plants in Texas have been noted to produce green seeds in late April and mature seed by early June. The fruits are numerous, black when mature, rounded and up to  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch in diameter containing three seeds. The mature seeds are thrown from the plants leaving several light tan colored pedicles resembling slender golf tees.

Ceanothus is considered good browse value for livestock, deer and antelope. Quail, dove, turkey and songbirds eat the seeds. Due to its short stature ceanothus stays within browsing reach of all animals so it is easily over-used. The flowers are attractive to many species of pollinators. The early flowering period of April to May provides nectar and pollen at a critical time early in the growing season when numerous pollinators are very active.

Ceanothus found growing out in the open in pastures indicates a history of good grazing management; if found growing only in the protection of other bushes it indicates heavier than desired grazing by livestock and wildlife. Placing a browsing exclosure wire cage around ceanothus plants will allow seeds to be produced so birds may spread them. Good grazing management is important in the management of desirable browse plants. Perhaps the easiest location to find inland ceanothus growing is on roadsides that are protected from grazing by livestock and only native deer and exotic animals venture out to graze adjacent to the highways. Look for the clusters of white flowers beginning in April and then look for teeth on the leaf margins and the three veins merging at the leaf base to confirm the identity. Road cuts showing lots of white limestone soil and rocks would be a great place to look for ceanothus. It is found most often in dry, shallow-rocky soils in full sun. If you want to establish this plant in a rock garden collect seeds and plant seeds where you want the plant to grow. Once established it has a deep, fibrous root system and doesn't readily tolerate transplanting.

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Photo Captions:

1 Inland Ceanothus shown growing in dry shallow limestone soil.



2. Flowers of Inland ceanothus appear from April to May.



3. Inland ceanothus flowers appear in an umbel shape on short stalks.



4. Flower clusters give way to green fruits in late April.



5. Immature fruits of ceanothus appear in May.



6. Ripened fruits explode away from the plant ensuring the potential spread of the plants.



7. Young ceanothus plants filling a niche while growing on rangeland.

