



(Photo: Rebekah D. Wallace,  
University of Georgia, Bugwood.org)

# Native Plant Highlight: New Jersey Tea

## *Ceanothus americanus*

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*This article is courtesy of the Coast Plain Chapter of the Georgia Native Plant Society. The GNPS is dedicated to promoting the stewardship and conservation of Georgia's native plants and their habitats. The Coastal Plain Chapter serves the people in the Coastal Plain ecoregion of Georgia. This includes all areas south of the Fall Line in middle Georgia, from the Alabama and Florida borders to the Atlantic ocean. To learn more, please visit their [website](#).*

### Description and Native Habitat

New Jersey Tea is a shrub in the buckthorn family (*Rhamnaceae*) and has many other names, red root, redshank, soap flower, wild snow ball, snow bush, and mountain lilac to name a few. It grows as a compact, rounded, deciduous shrub 2-3' tall and wide in sun to part shade covered in elongated clusters of white flowers for about a month in late spring to early summer.

Flowers are followed by dark brown round capsules that eventually explode to disperse seed in its natural environment. It is found in areas with well drained gravely to sandy soils with an extremely wide range that covers much of the eastern United states (Bonap.com).

This is a tough plant suited to dry soil because of its extensive root system. In the Coastal Plain of Georgia, it is often found in sandy upland plant communities dominated by longleaf pine and wiregrass. As this is a fire-maintained community, New Jersey tea tolerates periodic prescribed burns.

### Garden Uses

As with all plant material you are considering, you need to evaluate all aspects of its temperament to determine if it will be a good fit. Certain characteristics could be a positive in one situation or a negative in another. It also depends on what soil type, soil moisture, and light conditions you have as well as the aesthetic you are going for in your home garden design.

**One tough plant:** The fact that this shrub develops a deep extensive root system is a positive attribute as it makes it much more resilient to dry and droughty conditions. Once established. It can have a relatively slow growth rate because it is expending resources to develop its deep root system.

This feature can make it take a while for the above-ground portion to create substantial growth. However, the deep root system on established plants makes them difficult to transplant. So just make sure you plant it exactly where you want it.

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This species also tends to sucker once established which can be a benefit if used in a hillside stabilization or an erosion control situation. In the home landscape this tendency to sucker might make this plant better suited for massing in low maintenance more natural style landscape (Foote & Jones 1998).



(Photo: Rebekah D. Wallace, University of Georgia, Bugwood.org)

As tough as this plant is, it is not resistant to wildlife browsing as deer and rabbit find it quite tasty, so will need protection when first planted until established. This shrub does recover well after fire, so this is a benefit if you are using prescribed fire to manage your landscape.

**Attract pollinators:** The flowers of New Jersey tea are not only attractive to the human eye they also attract many native pollinators including butterflies, moths, wasps, bees, flies, and beetles. The flowers are a source for nectar and pollen.

This shrub is also a host plant for several species of butterfly (Lotts et al., 2017). Caterpillars of the spring azure (*Celastrina ladon*), summer azure



(Photo: Ansel Oommen, Bugwood.org Spring Azure)

(*Celastrina neglecta*), and mottled duskywing (*Erynnis martialis*) feed on the flowers, flower buds, and fruit of the New Jersey tea (Wynia, 2010).



(Photo: Christa Hayes Summer Azure butterfly)

**Provide food:** Two important game species (turkeys and quail) use the seeds as a food source (Wynia, 2010).

**Other uses:** New Jersey tea was named Herb Society of America Native Plant of 2019 as well as the 2019 Wildflower of the Year by the Virginia Native Plant Society. As its name implies, the dried leaves have been used as a source to make a

caffeine-free tea-like drink especially popular during the Revolutionary War.

Flowers make light green dye. The rest of the plant makes a cinnamon red dye (Hale, 2019). The roots yield a red dye and have a variety of medicinal uses. Flowers contain saponins and will create a lather when crushed and mixed with water (VA Native Plant Society, 2019).

**Propagation:** "Propagation by seed is best; cloth bags will help catch the seeds as fruits mature; brief scarifying with hot water (180 °F to 200 °F) followed by stratification at ca 40 °F for two or three months will improve seed germination." (VA Native Plant Society 2019). Do not wild collect any species without landowner permission. Look for reputable native plant nurseries that supply this species from sustainable sources. Check out the list of recommended native plant nurseries compiled by the Georgia Native Plant initiative. <https://botgarden.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Directory-of-Native-Plant-Nurseries.pdf>

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