Ceanothus is a large genus of woody shrubs and small trees in the Rhamnaceae, or Buckthorn Family. California is the world hotspot for Ceanothus. Of about 45 species growing in North and Central America, more than 40 native species and 20 varieties occur in our state. Known as the wild lilacs or California lilacs, many ceanothus species are highly valued by wildlife. Common names for some species, such as deerbrush and buckbrush, attest to a close relationship with deer. Ceanothus are also valued as ornamentals and widely known as garden plants because they occur in many habitats and have forms ranging from ground covers to large upright shrubs or small trees. Many native species and cultivars are available in nurseries.

The genus Ceanothus is generally easy to recognize. The flowers are individually small, but are arranged in open, showy inflorescences made of many flowers. The flower stems are the same color as the flowers, making the inflorescence showy and the flowering shrubs stunning. Ceanothus also has leaves with 1 or 3 obvious veins, and distinctive fruits consisting of 3-part capsules. Three of our most common local ceanothus species are wedgeleaf ceanothus, Lemmon’s ceanothus, and deerbrush.

Wedgeleaf ceanothus, or Ceanothus cuneatus, is a large, rigidly branched shrub up to 12 feet in height. This species is also commonly known as buckbrush and grows throughout California (except in the desert.
regions)—in chaparral, woodlands, and forests below approximately 6,000 feet in elevation. Wedgeleaf ceanothus has aromatic, white to off-white flowers borne in dense umbels that bloom in early spring. It has small ½- to 1-inch, dull green leaves that are wedge- to spoon-shaped. This species is evergreen, though some leaves may drop in late summer. The fruits are small, brown capsules that burst open in summer. On a hot summer day, one can walk among these shrubs and actually hear the fruits popping as they erupt and release their seeds. This species is hardy and grows in open, hot, and dry locations. Wedgeleaf ceanothus is common in the area surrounding Redding and found in basically any patch of natural woodland or chaparral habitat.

Lemmon’s ceanothus, or *Ceanothus lemmonii*, is a low, densely branched shrub with a rounded shape growing to approximately 3 feet tall. It has evergreen leaves that are elliptical to oblong—green above and paler beneath. Lemmon’s ceanothus is striking in the spring when in flower, as the shrub becomes covered by many dense clusters of bright blue blossoms. This species only occurs in California and grows in the woodland and chaparral habitats of the interior Klamath Mountains, Coast Range, and the Sierra Nevada below approximately 3,500 feet in elevation. Locally, Lemmon’s ceanothus is fairly common around Whiskeytown Lake and the foothills west of Redding.

Deerbrush, or *Ceanothus integerrimus*, is an openly branched shrub up to 13 feet in height. This ceanothus species is deciduous and has pale green, 2- to 3-inch long, ovate to elliptical shaped leaves. Well known for stunning blooms, deerbrush has large plumes of fragrant flowers that are deep to pale blue, white, and occasionally pinkish. The flowers can be used to make soap and the shrub is considered one of California’s most valuable wildlife browse plants. Deerbrush occurs throughout California’s chaparrals, woodlands,
and low- to mid-elevation forests below about 7,000 feet. This species readily responds to disturbance and is often abundant following fire or logging. Deerbrush occurs locally in most of our surrounding foothills and becomes common in forested habitats such as the Shingletown area.

Wedgeleaf ceanothus, Lemmon’s ceanothus, deerbrush, and many other ceanothus species are well suited for garden use. These shrubs prefer open, dry locations, but can tolerate partial shade. They are low maintenance, fast growing, and require no supplemental water. Ceanothus are known for their showy flushes of bright flowers and serve as specimen plants or mix well with other drought-tolerant shrubs. The flowers readily attract native bees and other insects, and many wildlife species eat the seeds. Ceanothus foliage does represent a delicious buffet for deer and other browsers. So if your property has deer issues, these species may not be the best choice unless you can somehow control deer access to your garden. Another option is to let the deer do their thing; it usually won’t kill the plant, just stunt the growth a bit. In the end, though, you may end up with one of those odd-looking ornamental shrubs, and you never even had to touch a pair of pruning shears.

Blooming deerbrush has stunning large plumes of fragrant white, or deep to pale blue, flowers. Photo by Len Lindstrand III.

The odd shape of this wedgeleaf ceanothus shrub is caused by repeated deer browsing. Photo by Len Lindstrand III.