Drought resistance in a plant is not only admirable but in many cases a necessity. Add to its profile toughness, persistence with minimal care, longevity, pest resistance, compact size, and adaptability to soils of low fertility, and you have a plant of merit independent of ornamental characteristics.

*Ceanothus x pallidus* 'Roseus' offers all of the above plus ornamental quality. These attributes are common to the entire genus *Ceanothus*, which is well known to West Coast gardeners but is rarely seen in eastern gardens. Muted in color, it is easily integrated with stronger floral colors and is equally suited to formal landscapes as well as the more casual. Its pale rose-colored flowers appear in mid-June, well after the great spring rush of flowers, and remain for several weeks. If spent blossoms are removed immediately, some recurrent flowering will occur. If allowed to mature, flowers give way to light green fruits that mature into small wine-colored spheres scattered throughout the foliar green like small jewels. These fruits provide a strong visual attraction for several weeks in late summer, especially when set against plants with pink flowers or backed by burgundy foliage. With final ripening, the capsules turn beige-brown and split open along three suture lines, remaining on the plant well into the winter months.

Summer foliage is a medium green and, in my experience, entirely pest-free. The leaves remain in good condition until late October, then fall away with no significant color change. The new season's stems remain thin and supple all summer long. Those on the side exposed to the sun take on a dull burgundy color while on the shady or protected side they remain a light green.

The plant forms a mound, flat-topped to dome-shaped. If completely cut to the ground in spring, just as new growth begins, plants achieve a height of three feet and a spread of three to five feet by early June. Unpruned plants will be slightly taller but more open and rangy. Their consistently tight habit makes them useful in restricted spaces; they are not likely to exceed their allocated space. Individual plants spaced thirty inches apart in good light will coalesce into a continuous, dense surface from soil level to the upper tips, with no thinning or dieback where the plants merge. 'Roseus' is therefore useful both as a specimen plant or in a small hedge or mass planting.

*Ceanothus*, a member of the buckthorn family (Rhamnaceae), is exceptionally drought tolerant; indeed, it will not thrive in heavy or wet soils but instead prefers a soil with very good drainage. The ability to thrive with little water makes it ideal for the sandy soils of seacoast areas as well as inland on poorer, rocky soils. In poorly drained or frequently irrigated soils, *Ceanothus* becomes highly susceptible to root rots. They should never be planted where excess moisture is a problem, especially near irrigation systems.

*Ceanothus* comes from the Greek, *Keaonothus*, and was first applied to prickly plants. Linnaeus reassigned the name to this genus in 1753 when he described *Ceanothus americanus* in the *Species Plantarum*. The genus, which has fifty to sixty species, is entirely North American, with representatives in Canada, the United States, and Mexico. The majority of the species and natural hybrids are native to California. Four species are native east of the Mississippi River: *C. microphyllus* in parts of Florida, Alabama,
and Georgia; *C. serpyllifolius* in a few scattered areas of Florida and Georgia; *C. americanus* from Maine to North Dakota, south to Florida and Texas, and in southern Canada from Ontario to Manitoba; and *C. ovatus* in eastern and central states. *C. americanus* was the first species introduced from the American colonies to Europe in 1713, but it never became popular in gardens. A century later, *C. coeruleus*, with its showy panicles of sky blue flowers, was discovered in Mexico, and its introduction to Europe paved the way for a number of garden hybrids developed in French and Belgian nurseries before 1830. *C. x pallidus* 'Roseus' was one of these hybrids.

The parentage of *Ceanothus x pallidus* 'Roseus' combines stock that thrives in the alkaline soils of the West as well as in the acid soils of the East. (Plants at the Arnold Arboretum grow in an acid pH.) This tolerance of poor soils and salts extends the plant's range to include highway use. Sunlight exposure can range from full sun, which is preferable, to light shade, which causes some reduction of vigor and flowering as well as a more sparse overall effect.

At the Arnold Arboretum this *Ceanothus* dies back when temperatures dip to about zero degrees Fahrenheit with no snow cover. This requires removal of all dead and injured stems just before the new growing season, but at the same time it allows the plant to renew its aboveground parts. Even after dieback, plants with strong well-established root systems will produce a quick new flush of growth that remains full and robust. Annual dieback may in fact contribute to greater longevity. *Ceanothus* is often regarded as short-lived, persisting for no more than ten or twenty years, but the Arboretum's original plant, acquired in 1889 from the nursery of Victor Lemoine in Nancy, France, still thrives after more than a century. In milder climates there is no need to cut back the plant annually, but doing so every few years may help to keep plants tight and bushy. Major
shearing should be limited to once a year to maintain a mound that is relaxed and informal, rather than tight and sheared.

The Arboretum’s original plant found its way to the old shrub collection where for the first ninety-five years or so it received no exceptional care or, for that matter, much interest. I remember it in 1976 as a sad little plant with a great deal of old deadwood, invaded and nearly swamped by switch grasses. In 1986, as part of the renovation of the Eleanor Bradley Collection of Rosaceous Plants, it was lifted and divided into five or six parts. A group of four was placed in the Dwarf Conifer Garden just below the Bonsai House, on top of a stone wall in very dry soil with excellent drainage and no irrigation. During 1994, from late June until mid-September, several thousand cuttings were taken from this planting to be propagated for this year’s spring distribution to Friends of the Arnold Arboretum. Steve Effner, propagator at Quonset Nursery in South Dartmouth, Massachusetts, where the plants were grown, had the best results with cuttings taken just as the plant begins to harden up. Treated with mormodin #3 and stuck individually into #72 pots, a high proportion rooted within three to four weeks. They seemed to be adversely affected only by excess moisture.

Rehder, in his Manual of Cultivated Trees and Shrubs, reports that the hybrid complex known as Ceanothus x pallidus originated before 1830, thought to be the result of a cross between C. ovatus, which is native from New England to Texas, and Ceanothus x delilianus, itself a hybrid of the eastern C. americanus and the Mexican C. coeruleus. Thus, C. x pallidus ‘Roseus’ represents a mix of plants from warm and cold climates.

On receipt in 1889, our plant carried the name Ceanothus “hyb. flore Alba Pleno.” It was Alfred Rehder who applied the name C. x pallidus ‘Roseus’, a name that appears to be unique to the Arnold Arboretum; I cannot find it listed elsewhere. It may well exist in the European nursery trade under another name. Could it be the same as the plant ‘Marie Simon’? Perhaps not, for I suspect that ‘Marie Simon’ blooms slightly later. Problems of nomenclature aside, C. x pallidus ‘Roseus’ has thrived for well over a century at the Arnold Arboretum.

The wonderful forms of Ceanothus seen in European gardens offer an incentive to further hybridization work. Ceanothus x pallidus ‘Roseus’, while among the hardiest, might be improved still more. Recombination with more garden-worthy forms selected for flower and leaf color and other desirable characteristics could enrich the palette of Ceanothus cultivars for northern landscapes.

References


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