

*Acer circinatum*

**VINE MAPLE** is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to western North America it has small, purplish-red and dull-white flowers and leaves that turn yellow, orange or red in Autumn. It is also known as *Bois du diable* (French-Canadian), *Esdoorn* (Dutch), *Javor okrouhlostý* (Czech), Mountain maple, Oregon vine maple, *Viinivaahtera* (Finnish), *Vinlönn* (Swedish), and *Weinblatt-Ahorn* (German).

*Circinatum* means ‘coiled or rounded’ with reference to the branches.

The French-Canadian common name *Bois du diable* came from the French trappers who were often tripped up by its long sprawling branches when these crossed the portage trails along which the more often than not laden men were progressing.

Records indicate that the fresh sap was eaten (or drunk) by some American Indian tribes. Certainly the Klallam tribe in the Washington area in western North America ate the dried sap.

The slender branches have been used in the past by several local North American Indian tribes. For instance suitable poles were used by the Quinault tribe for roofing, and they used long straight shoots for weaving openwork baskets for general household uses such as carrying firewood, clams or fish – as also did the Makah. In what is now British Columbia in Canada the Shuswap and the Thompson tribes used this wood to make snowshoes, and the Modesse Indians used the branches similarly. Saplings were used by the Skagit as swings for babies’ cradles.

The stems seem to have been in demand among several tribes for fishing. The Chehalis, the Lummi and the Quileute tribes all used them for their wattlework fish traps, and the Skagit fashioned salmon tongs out of the saplings. (The Scottish botanist, plant collector and explorer David Douglas (1798-1834) said he had seen the stems fashioned into ‘scoop nets’ for catching salmon in the narrow rivers and in the rapids.) Then for hunting the Nitinaht used the wood to make their bows, and the Thompson also used it for both bows and arrows but ensured that it was not only green but that the heartwood had been taken out.

In the context of food the Karok Indians used the wood to make paddles for cooking, and the Nitinaht made the wood into bowls and drinking vessels. The latter also employed it to make oil containers and small boxes, while the Thompson Indians chose the wood for implement handles. In addition the wood provided firewood for several tribes, and the Quinault used the wood to make charcoal which was then mixed with oil for a black paint.

Women in the Karok tribe used vine maple as an ingredient in a love potion.

Vine maple was discovered by the American explorer friends, Captains Meriwether Lewis (1774-1809) and William Clark (1770-1838) at the end of their successful two year pioneering expedition (1804-1806) into the North American interior. It was named by a horticulturist and plant collector, Frederick Pursh (1774-1820) in 1814. David Douglas introduced seed to Britain in 1826.

It is cultivated as an ornamental plant and is also considered to be a candidate for the attentions of bonsai enthusiasts.

The shape of the leaf is the model adopted for the rank insignia of majors and lieutenant-

colonels in the United States Army.

Like that in bigleaf maple (*Acer macrophyllum*), although the sap contains less sugar than some of its well known close relatives, it is still considered to be worth tapping in the early Spring, particularly from the trunks of more northern trees that experience cold winters with the warmer summers of more southern areas. It is sometimes made into a soft drink and it is also concentrated to a syrup used to sweeten many foods.

The leaves, like some of its close relatives, would appear to have a preservative property as they are sometimes wrapped around apples (*Malus*) or root crops before storage.

As the green wood will not burn it was viewed as ideal local material for the hooks for hanging cooking pots over fires. The mature wood was turned into tool handles, cart shafts or boxes – and was also burnt as fuel.

Apparently deer particularly enjoy browsing on vine maple.

Medicinally, vine maple seems to have had little value although the North American Thompson Indians in British Columbia took a mixture of its wood charcoal, with brown sugar and water to ease dysentery and a similar remedy was prescribed for treating polio.