

Berberis aquifolium

[Synonyms : *Berberis brevipes*, *Berberis diversifolia*, *Berberis nana*, *Berberis nutkana*, *Berberis piperiana*, *Berberis repens*, *Mahonia aquifolium*, *Mahonia piperiana*, *Odostemon aquifolium*]

OREGON-GRAPE is an evergreen shrub. Native to the western coast of North America (northern California to British Columbia) it has small, heavily fragrant, rich yellowish-green flowers and leaves that sometimes turn red, purplish or yellow in Autumn.

It is also known as Barberry, Blue barberry, California barberry, *Fiederberberitze* (German), Holly barberry, Holly grape, Holly leaved barberry, Holly-leaved berberis, Holly mahonia, Mahonia (English, Finnish and Swedish), *Mahonie* (German), Mountain grape, Oregon-grape root, Oregon holly grape, Rocky mountain grape, Tall oregon-grape, Trailing mahonia, and Wild oregon-grape.

Warning - Oregon-grape should not be taken internally during pregnancy. The bark and roots can affect the central nervous system.

Aquifolium is derived from a classical Latin name for holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), and Latin *-folia* (leaved) meaning 'with holly-like leaves'.

Many North American Indian tribes, including the Nespelem, Snohomish, some of the Skagit, some of the Kwakiutl (who only ate them occasionally and then, when sour), Swinomish, Sanpoil, Okanagan-Colville, Samish, Squaxin, Klallam and Thompson used to eat the tiny, bloomy, purple-blue fruit raw. Makah, Thompson and some of the Salish Indians made the berries into preserves, and the Sanpoil prepared jam from them. The berries were dried and stored for future use by some of the Skagit Indians and the Thompson tribe – but whereas the former expected to eat them in Winter, the Thompson Indians only consumed them if there was nothing else available.

The Indian tribes also extracted a yellow dye from the shrub. Nitinaht and Thompson Indians both used the bark, while the Skagit, Yurok, Snohomish, Chehalis, Okanagan-Colville, some of the Salish and the Makah tribes all obtained it from the roots. The fruit provided an ingredient for a paint used by the Karok Indians on their bows and arrows.

The shrub was a source of medicine for quite a few North American Indian tribes, including the Nitinaht. It was chosen by the Squaxin, Thompson and Okanagan-Colville Indians for blood disorders, and the latter also used it for kidney problems. It was a treatment for stomach upsets among the Sanpoil and Blackfoot tribes, and the Sanpoil also used it to ease vomiting and treat tuberculosis. Karok Indians took it as a remedy for diarrhoea, while the Thompson and Nitinaht Indians prescribed it as a laxative. For the former it was also turned to for treating venereal disease and rheumatism, Blackfoot Indians chose it to stem internal bleeding, the Squaxin tribe valued it for easing sore throats, and both the Swinomish and Samish took it as a tonic.

The fruit used to be marketed in North America – and are still made there into jam and other preserves.

Since 1899 oregon-grape has been a state flower of Oregon in the United States.

The plant was introduced to England by the Scottish botanist, David Douglas (1798-1834). He was a collector for the Horticultural Society of London and this species was found when he explored the Pacific north-west between 1825-1827. It would seem that it caused quite

a shrub when it arrived and within ten years was to be found growing on many of the English estates. Eventually the shrub was recognized as game cover but today, in addition, it can also be grown ornamentally for its attractive appearance.

The fruit are only eaten by birds when food is scarce.

Medicinally, herbalists recommended the root in the treatment of blood disorders, digestive ailments, syphilis and skin diseases. Today it is used as a remedy particularly for gastritis and some skin diseases.