

Berberis vulgaris

[Synonyms : *Berberis dumetorum*, *Berberis vulgaris* var. *canadensis*]

BARBERRY is a deciduous shrub. Native to eastern Asia, and to Europe, it has small, pale yellow flowers, which do not have a particularly pleasant scent.

It is also known as *Ambar-baris* (Arabic), American barberry, Barbaryn, Barbery, Barboranne, *Bedana* (Persian), Berber, *Berberi* (Italian), Berberidis, *Berberis* (Swedish), *Berberize* (German), *Berbero* (Italian), Berbery, *Chachar* (Indian), *Chatroa* (Hindi), Common barberry, *Crespino* (Italian), *Diken üzümü* (Turkish), *Dráč obyčajný* (Slovak), Dragon grape, *Dřišťál obecný* (Czech), *Épine-vinette* (French), *Épinne-vinnette* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), European barberry, *Gemeiner Sauerdorn* (German), *Gewöhnliche Berberitze* (German), Gouan, Guild, Guild tree, Holy thorn, Jaunders tree, Jaundice barberry, Jaundice berry, *Kashmal* (Punjabi), Maiden barber, Pepperidge, Pepperidge bush, Piperidge, Pipperidge bush, Piprage, *Pren Melyn* (Welsh), Rilts, *Ruostehappomarja* (Finnish), *Sauerdorn* (German), *Scotanella* (Italian), Sowberry, *Surtorn* (Swedish), *Uvetta* (Italian), *Vinettier* (French), Woodsoor, Woodsour, Woodsower, *Vanlig berberis* (Swedish), and *Zirishk* (Indian); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of ill temper, sharpness, and sourness of temper.

The flowers' abundant nectar is particularly attractive to bees.

Warning – barberry should not be taken internally during pregnancy. Large quantities can cause diarrhoea and vomiting and can also affect the central nervous system.

Vulgaris means 'common'. In Italian Christian lore holds that barberry was one of the plants forming the Crown of Thorns placed on Jesus' head and from this comes one of the plant's common names Holy thorn.

During the medieval period this shrub could be seen growing near churches and monasteries. However farmers, even early in 20th Century, would blame the plant for 'blighting' wheat and it came to be banished to the hedgerows. This aversion continued until the more recent research into and the understanding of plant diseases was carried out. The 'blight' is explained by the fact that barberry is actually a host plant for wheat rust. But on being banished to the hedgerows barberry itself became infected by black rust fungus and as a result is becoming scarce certainly in Britain.

Early settlers took barberry to North America with them, particularly those who settled in New England, and cooked the fruit as they had in Europe. Nowadays any *Berberis* is banned there – but in the intervening period barberry found its way into the range of medicinal treatments of several North American Indian tribes. According to records the Mohican seem to have relied upon the fruit as a remedy for treating fever, the Penobscot and Micmac tribes both used the bark for sore throats and gum disorders, and the Shinnecock Indians came to prescribe a leaf decoction for treating jaundice.

Barberry used to be cultivated for its small translucent, scarlet to purple berries that were especially prized and were once used for jellies, as a sweetmeat (in sugar-plums), as a garnish and as a pickle (especially in the late 18th Century). In addition in England it is said that the dried leaves once provided a meat seasoning, and a sorrel-like (*Rumex acetosa*) flavouring in stuffings; and bruised berries (mixed with sugar and water) have been prepared as a drink. On the European Continent the latter was sometimes used as an

alternative ingredient to lemons (*Citrus limon*) in punch. Today a seedless variety of the plant is still used in Rouen (France) to make a famous jam, *confiture d'épine vinette* – and the fruit are also used by the drinks industry in alcoholic beverages.

The hard yellow wood is said to be ideal for turning and for making furniture. It has also been fashioned into toothpicks, and mosaic pieces for marquetry. A yellow dye for wool and leather can be extracted from the inner bark or the root bark.

Medicinally, in the West the plant has been recommended primarily as a purgative and tonic, and was prescribed for allaying the thirst associated with diabetes. The root has also been used for treating kidney stones, gall-bladder ailments and painful periods. In the Far East it is used particularly as a remedy for diarrhoea and dysentery. In Egypt the berry juice has been taken as a remedy for fever. The bark and the wood were once part of a cure for jaundice (the yellow under-bark used for the infusion no doubt conformed to the Doctrine of Signatures' principles) and for catarrh.

It is the birthday flower for 10th April.