

Cercocarpus ledifolius

CURLLEAF MOUNTAIN MAHOGANY is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to western North America it has small inconspicuous white flowers and small fruit with long slender twisted tails that glisten in Autumn sunlight.

It is also known as Curlleaf cercocarpus, and Mountain mahogany.

Ledifolius is derived from the genus name *Ledum* (now part of the *Rhododendron* genus) and *-folia* (leaved) components meaning ‘with leaves similar to those of Labrador tea or marsh rosemary.

The slow-growing plants can be very long-lived as some have been found whose approximate age has been calculated as 1,350 years.

Many believe it was the Mormons based in Salt Lake City, Utah in the United States who christened the tree ‘mountain mahogany’. They are said to have used its wood for building their Tabernacle organ.

A red dye can be obtained from the inner bark and this was used by the Havasupai North American tribe on their buckskin.

This extremely hard wood was used by several North American Indian tribes such as the Montana Indian, the Klamath, Shoshoni and Gosiute for making hunting and fishing weapons eg. bows, arrows and fish spears, and tools such as those needed to dig up roots.

It was an ingredient in the medicine chest of several North American tribes. The Kawaiisu Indians used it to treat earache and some female problems, and as with the Paiute and Shoshoni too, it also provided a treatment for venereal diseases. Pneumonia and some stomach disorders were treated with it by the Paiute tribe, and they and the Shoshoni both prescribed it as a blood tonic and as a remedy for coughs, colds, tuberculosis, diarrhoea (especially in children) and some heart disorders – and both also applied it to sores and wounds. For the Shoshoni it provided a remedy for treating diphtheria and some eye problems as well. They and the Gosiute and Paiute Indians put it on burns.

In the 19th Century this wood was highly valued as a source of charcoal destined for smelting ores. In the last half of the 20th Century this charcoal became prized for what some might consider to be a far more frivolous use that of fuel for barbecues.

Locally the scraped, aromatic reddish-brown bark has provided a flavouring for a tea made from the leaves of mormon tea (*Ephedra trifurca*), drunk by the early North American settlers.

Authorities note that its foliage is nutritious and when it is within reach of browsing animals is particularly enjoyed by sheep, goats and deer, as well as some non-gamebirds. Deer-mice eat the seeds and seedlings are enticing to rabbits (apart from any other wildlife). They also record that curlleaf mountain mahogany offers good cover (not least in Winter) for the wild deer and birds too.