

Rhamnus purshiana

[Synonyms : *Frangula purshiana*, *Rhamnus alnifolia*]

CASCARA is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to western North America (from British Columbia to California) it has tiny greenish flowers.

It is also known as Alderleaf buckthorn, *Amerikanischer Faulbaum* (German), Bayberry, Bearberry, Bearwood, Bitterbark, Bitterbloom, Buckthorn cascara, California buckthorn, California coffee, Cascara buckthorn, *Cascara sagrada* (Spanish), Chitam, Chittam, Chittam-wood, Chittern, Chittem bark, Coffeeberry, Coffeebush, Coffee tree, Oregon bearwood, Pigeonberry, Sacred bark, *Sagrada* (Swedish), Shittimwood, Wahoo, Western buckthorn, Western coffee, Wild cherry, Wild coffee, Wild coffeebush, and Yellow-wood.

The tree is often cut down in order to remove the bark but it is resilient and will re-sprout from the stump.

Warning – fresh bark and fruit are viewed as potentially poisonous. The sap can cause dermatitis.

Purshiana commemorates a German horticulturist, plant collector and writer, Frederick Pursh (1774-1820) who arrived in Baltimore (United States) in 1801 and moved to Philadelphia the following year. There he eventually met American botanists including Benjamin Smith Barton (1766-1815) who was to publish the first American botany textbook entitled *Elements of Botany*. Barton employed him as curator for his American plant herbarium project (eventually to be abandoned). For this Pursh not only collected plants himself but was also deputed by Barton to examine plant specimens received in 1805 from the celebrated explorer Meriwether Lewis via the then President, President Jefferson who had been enthused by the herbarium dream. In 1807 Pursh was directly employed by Lewis to prepare drawings and descriptions of his, Lewis's, specimens. He abandoned this in 1809 to the reported disgust of both Lewis and Barton and moved to London (England) two years later with some of their specimens and commissioned drawings as well as all his notes on the plants. There he not only worked for the Royal Botanic Garden but also, under the patronage of an English botanist and prominent plant collector, Aylmer Bourke Lambert (1761-1842) who was also a vice-president of the Linnean Society, he prepared all his own American specimens, together with appropriated ones for publication. In 1813 his *Flora Americanae Septentrionalis* was published and was the most comprehensive book on American plants according to authorities for a short time. However his disregard for others would appear to have contributed significantly to his downfall. Although he published other material after his prime work the reception was minimal. In 1816 he moved to Canada with the intent of preparing a Flora for that Country. But not only was his specimen collection lost in a fire in 1819 but he was also poor and yielding to alcoholism. He died in 1820 in Montreal.

Cascara sagrada is a Spanish interpretation of a North American Indian name for the bark and means 'sacred bark'.

It is surprising to note that there are records which declare that the North American Makah tribe ate the berries as a food.

Skagit American Indians obtained a green dye from the bark and this was used on mountain goat wool.

The wood was used by both the Nitinaht and Hesquiat Indian tribes to make tool handles.

Those North American Indians who used the bark as both a tonic and a laxative passed on this medicinal information to Spanish-Mexican settlers and it is referred to in 18th Century American records. Authorities note particularly that the Salish Indians used cascara to make a tonic, and the widespread recognition of the plant as the source of a laxative or purgative is well-illustrated by the names of the tribes where it is known to have been used. These include the Flathead, Kutenai, Bella Coola, Skagit, Klallam, Makah, Nitinaht, Yurok, Haisla, Quinault, Cowlitz, Sanpoil, Green River Group, Karok, Okanagan-Colville, Squaxin, Thompson, Swinomish, Lummi, Kwakiutl, Tolowa, Hesquiat, Hanaksiala, Quileute and Shuswap. The Hesquiat, Paiute and Kwakiutl tribes also used it to treat stomach upsets, and the Skagit prescribed it for dysentery. Liver disorders were treated with it by the Thompson Indians, and it was used by the Klamath and Montana Indian tribes to cause vomiting when this was required. The Quileute Indians used it in the treatment of some venereal diseases. For the Hesquiat tribe it provided a remedy for worms, and the Okanagan-Colville gave it for some blood ailments. The latter also used it to ease rheumatism, while the Skagit tribe applied it in poultices to swellings, and the Nitinaht and Squaxin Indians all used it on sores.

The wood has been used for turning and to make posts and parts of furniture.

In 1877 orthodox American medicine adopted the use of the bark and in 1888 a pharmaceutical preparation was marketed but was initially available only in the United States. This nauseous bitter-tasting liquid extract crossed the Atlantic to Europe six years later and came to be a familiar sight in many a household medicine chest on both sides of the 'pond' until the 2nd World War. It has been shown that the dried or fluid-extracts have only 15% of the power of the unprocessed bark. (The bark is still collected today in the states of Oregon and Washington in the United States.)

Even though its popularity decreased by the 1950s demand for this bark was still sufficient to pose a threat to the plant and protection controls were introduced.

Today cascara is used to treat digestive disorders, piles and habitual constipation.