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Back to Herbs
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Eflash

Oregon Grape

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Common names: Oregon Grape and Mountain Grape
Alternative Names: Mahonia aquifolium, Berberis aquifolium, Holly-Leaved Barberry, Sowberry, Woodsour, Blue Barberry, Holly Mahonia.

It is generally assumed that it was the English settlers who brought the berries with them when they arrived on the shores of America. The English reportedly named the Oregon grape barberry, as it is still known to natives of the west and Northwest. Initially, it was thought that the shrub, which so closely resembled the holly, belonged to the species of Berberis, but it was later proved that it belonged to their own genus, Mahonia.

Most American herbalists rank the Oregon grape as one among the most outstanding and exceptional Native American herbs available today. They also believe that the plant is in fact one of the best herbs available that effectively stimulates liver activity and the secretion of bile. This is due to the Oregon grape containing a high level of the alkaloid berberine, which is in turn an important constituent of other similarly powerful healing plants like goldenseal.

The Oregon grape can stimulate weakened livers, and at the same time dramatically alleviate liver-induced symptoms such as headaches, poor digestion, and toxic blood. The versatile herb is also regarded as a blood purifier, although this point has not been clarified through scientific research. Herbalists prefer to use the Oregon grape to cleanse the liver, the spleen and in some cases, the blood too.

The European barberry is often said to be excellent for the digestion, and that it was exceptionally good for the gallbladder and the liver. In America, Oregon grape of both European and American varieties was used for the treatment of dysentery and diarrhea, and also for a variety of digestive problems and disorders. The yellow color of the wood is derived from the active ingredient in the plant, berberine, along with other alkaloids. Berberine is a component present in the Berberis and Mahonia species as well as in the goldenseal. Oregon grape may be used as an effective substitute for goldenseal, which is listed as endangered.

Oregon grape (Mahonia aquifolium) grows naturally from British Columbia south to California. The root of the plant is part used by herbalists and medical researchers. Oregon grape kills bacteria and reduces inflammation. It's been used to treat such varying diseases as giardia (beaver fever), candida (yeast infection), viral diarrhea and even cholera. In China, studies show that Oregon grape root speeds recovery from chemotherapy and radiation therapies. Eczema and psoriasis sufferers have been successfully treated using Oregon grape root to ease inflammation, irritation, and itching. It is yet another bitter herb that's reputed to rid the body of intestinal worms.

Although berberine is a reasonably effective antibacterial in its own right, the antibacterial activity of Oregon grape and other barberries may not be strictly due to this alkaloid. Many bacteria, such as Staphylococcus aureus, have developed multidrug resistance pumps (MDRs) that protect them from both synthetic and natural antibiotics, including berberine. However, over the millennia, plants develop ways to circumvent bacterial resistance. Recent studies indicate that M. aquifolium contains a specific multidrug resistance pump inhibitor (MDR Inhibitor) named 5'methoxyhydnocarpin (5'MHC) which works to decrease bacterial resistance to antibiotics and antibacterial agents.

Plant antimicrobials are not used as systemic antibiotics at present. The main reason for this is their low level of activity, especially against gram-negative bacteria. Major plant pathogens belong to the gram-negative bacteria, which makes the low level of activity of plant antimicrobials against this group of microorganisms puzzling. It is possible that the apparent ineffectiveness of plant antimicrobials is largely due to the permeability barrier. Direct measurement of the uptake of berberine, a model plant antimicrobial, confirmed that disabling of the MDRs strongly increases the level of penetration of berberine into the cells of gram-negative bacteria. These results suggest that plants might have developed means of delivering their antimicrobials into bacterial cells. These findings also suggest that plant antimicrobials might be developed into effective, broad-spectrum antibiotics in combination with inhibitors of MDRs.

Oregon grape is in the same family as barberry and both contain the same alkaloids as goldenseal. Barberry is more specific for the liver while Oregon grape is a valuable aid to the lymphatic system.

Oregon grape rhizome and roots have the following properties: alterative, antibiotic, antiseptic, astringent, bitter taste, cholagogue (bile stimulating), cooling, diuretic, emetic, laxative, thyroid stimulant. They affect the blood, intestines, liver, skin, spleen, and stomach.

Traditional uses of Oregon grape include: acne, arthritis, bronchial congestion, chronic fatigue, eczema, hepatitis, herpes, hypoglycemia, indigestion, lymphatic congestion, menstrual problems, psoriasis, scrofula, syphilis, and vaginitis.

In modern times, Oregon grape is known as a good liver cleanser. This is due to the fact that it increases bile production. This action also aids digestion and purifies the blood. When combined with dandelion, milk thistle or celandine, it can be very effective in combating hepatitis B and jaundice.

Oregon grape's antiseptic properties make it a useful external application for skin conditions. Internally, its blood purifying properties make it useful for blood conditions as well as skin problems.

Recent studies have shown that berberine-containing herbs may be useful for those suffering from diarrhea and especially bacterial dysentery.

Taken internally it may treat the following problems:

- Syphilis
- Hemorrhages
- Stomach Complaints
- Impure Blood Conditions
- Strep Throat
- Diuretic

- Herpes
- Kidney
- Laxative
- Rheumatism
- Acne
- Boils
- Psoriasis
- Eczema

And skin conditions that may be directly linked to poor function of the gallbladder.

CONSTITUENTS
Oregon grape contains isoquinoline alkaloids (including berberine, berbamine, and hydrastine). These alkaloids are strong antiseptics and seem to reduce the severity of psoriasis.

SIDE EFFECTS AND CAUTIONS
Oregon grape is deemed not suitable for pregnant women, because of present evidence that taking Oregon grape can cause uterine contractions in animals on which it has been tested. Taking too much Oregon grape can cause diarrhea and other undesirable effects like kidney inflammation, and some unwelcome psychological effects of stupor and daze.

Excess use of Oregon grape internally (more than 2 to 3 weeks) is not recommended. Studies shows that Oregon grape increases levels of bilirubin and it might worsen jaundice.

Sincerely,

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The Back to Herbs Team

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