



Oregon grape for food, wellness and beauty

By Anne Munier

The forest edges are getting a little bluer these days as Oregon grape (*Mahonia* spp.) berries are starting to ripen. Oregon grape (both the tall and dull varieties) is . . . a classic example of a multi-purpose non-timber forest product (NTFP) and has been taken advantage of for food, medicine, dye, crafts, landscaping, and floral products (not to be too utilitarian about such matters- they certainly have integral value and ecological benefits as well!).

Oregon grape is an evergreen shrub that grows up to 2.5 m (tall variety) or 0.8 m (dull variety) high. The leaves contain 5-11 or 9-18 leaflets (for tall and dull respectively) and are thick, leathery, shiny, and have spiny teeth along the edges. The yellow flowers grow in clusters 3-8 cm long and develop into blue berries. Both species grow in dry forests of southern BC, with the dull grape concentrated closer to the coast, and growing in moist as well as dry forests.

Uses: This plant is often used in Christmas decorations as “mock holly”. The berries are not sweet but can make a fine jelly (see recipe below) or wine. The flowers and young leaves can be munched on as well (personal observation- flowers get sweeter as the season progresses). The roots and leaves are thought to be medicinal for various purposes including digestive complaints, blood purification, uterus conditions and skin problems. The plant has antioxidant, antiseptic, and antibacterial properties. And if all that were not enough, the bark can be used as a yellow dye.

Harvest: Foliage can be collected with pruning shears from spring onwards but are often harvested in late fall or early winter for Christmas decorations. Commercial harvesters tend to focus on leaves with dark green foliage; these tend to be found in shady locations. Flowers and berries are harvested when ripe, usually in early and mid-summer respectively. Watch out for the spines, you may want to pack some gloves along! For medicinal purposes the roots are considered most potent in the fall and are collected from then until early spring. No matter what the purpose, be sure not to overharvest!! Collect from no more than 25 per cent of the plants in an area, and if harvesting roots then replant any rhizomes (underground stems) with buds on them, and don't harvest in the same area for a couple years to allow for regeneration. It is best to harvest the plant after the berries have fallen or been eaten by wildlife to maximize regeneration potential and minimize impact on wildlife food sources.

Preparation: To clean debris from the berries you can pour the hardy fruits into a shallow box and give them a gentle shake. Then transfer them to another container and repeat the process until they are free of debris, and rinse. If using the roots wash them carefully with potable water and avoid removing root bark; a brush should not be used. Chop the root to desired size

before drying as dried roots are difficult to process. While flowers and leaves are not commonly consumed, some will eat them raw, or will simmer young leaves until tender.

Recipe: Oregon grape jelly (courtesy Oregon State University Extension Service)

Select firm ripe Oregon grapes. Wash, leaving on stems. Place in large preserving kettle, covering with water. Boil 10 minutes, then mash and boil 5 minutes longer. Drain through jelly bag. Measure juice into large preserving kettle and boil 10 minutes. Add $\frac{3}{4}$ as much sugar as juice. Stir until sugar is dissolved. Boil rapidly until it sheets from a spoon. Remove from heat, skim at once, and pour into hot, sterilized jars. Adjust lids and process 5 minutes in a boiling water canner.

Cautions

Pregnant women should avoid this plant as it may stimulate the uterus. Consumption of high amounts can cause nosebleeds, skin, and eye irritation. Adults should not consume Oregon grape for more than 7 consecutive days, and children for no more than 3 days. Also best to avoid if taking antibiotics for diarrhea.

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