

Elnora A.
Old Coyote

OREGON GRAPE—*Holly of the Rocky Mountains*

ECOLOGY • INDIAN FOLKLORE • MEDICINE & FOOD

*Holly grape, holly leaves...
clusters of beautiful,
yellow flowers in summer,
turning into sour,
purple grapes come autumn.*

*Evergreen, creeping along the ground
at the foot of douglas firs,
its leaves green in summer,
lose their green in autumn,
and decorate the forest with red
all winter long.*

*When the short rays of the summer sun
come again, the green returns
to the Oregon grape leaves.*

In these parts, the Oregon grape is a low-growing plant with holly-like leaves—not the same as the much taller Oregon-grape shrub that is the Oregon state flower. Indian people and pioneers have used this grape. Its purple berries are edible and the roots can be boiled into a tea and used as an antiseptic, tonic, stimulant, or other treatments. From the roots come the alkaloid *berberine*, used to stimulate the involuntary muscles, such as in the gut (peristalsis) and the heart. Its roots and bark were also boiled for a yellow dye.

ECOLOGY

Oregon grape grows in the Rocky Mountain region on wooded mountain slopes and on open hillsides in all of the coniferous forests on fairly dry, rocky soils at low-to-medium elevations in the mulch from the other trees. It is found above the

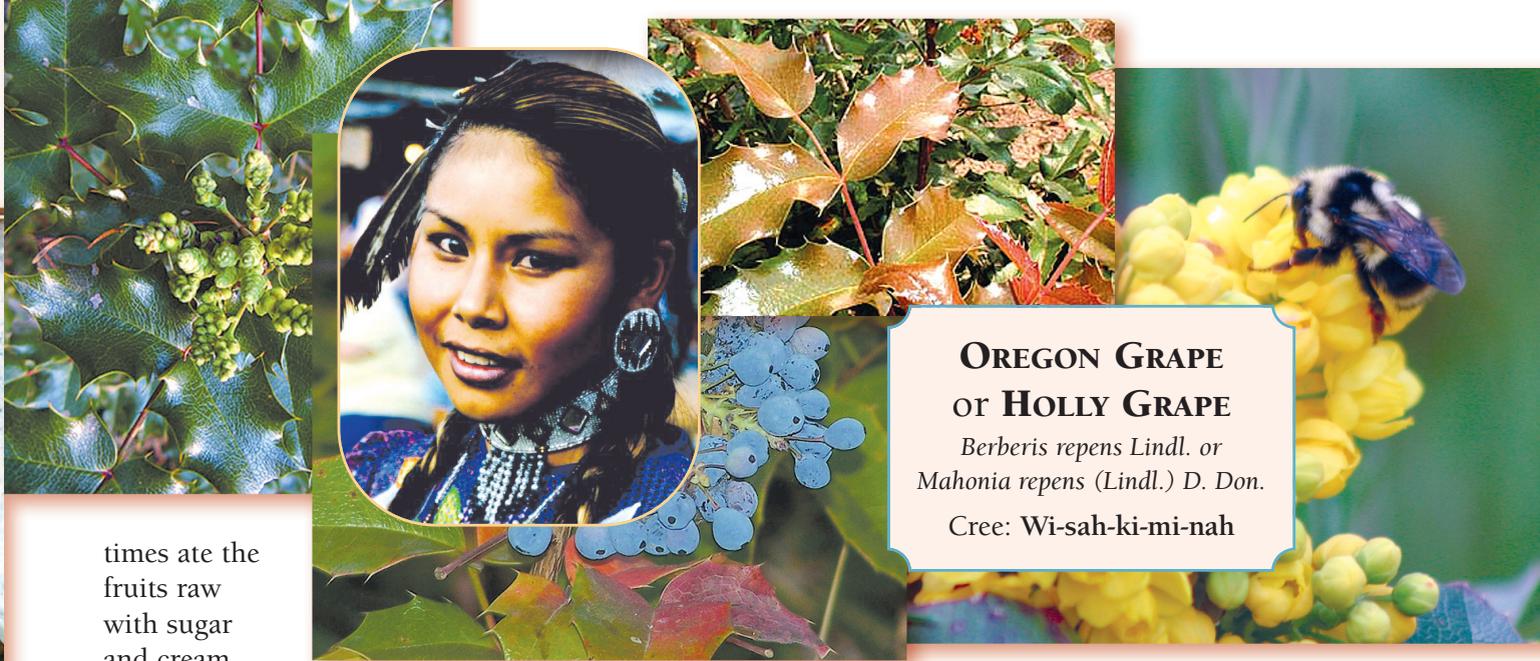
ponderosa pine in the mountains. However it grows from sea level to mountain summit, it is one of the most conspicuous shrubs under the douglas fir and under stands of aspen and alder. This plant is fairly susceptible to fire, and if burned, it will reproduce from rhizomes, but it takes 5 to 10 years to come back to its original height and density.

The main stems of this shorter Oregon grape only rise an inch or two above the ground, actually extensions of the many creeping roots (rhizomes) that form interconnected masses underground. Both stems and roots have a bright yellow color and are intensely bitter due to the berberine.

FOLKLORE & FOOD

The roots, leaves, and stems of Oregon grape can be collected anytime and stored in a dry place, a paper bag, or a canister. The leaves, twigs and shoots are browsed some by deer and even by cattle and horses in winter when other browsing is scarce.

The Plains Indians ate the fruits raw, but more often after the first frost, when the fruits are sweeter. Flathead Indians found that roasting the fruits made them less sour and more pleasing. Some early people found they could add sweetener, such as the inner bark of the willow or cottonwood or sap of the box elder, and boil and thicken these fruits to a pudding as they did other berries and fruits, but if there were plenty of other fruits, the Oregon grape was less desirable. When white settlers came with sugar, the Oregon grapes were made more palatable. Flathead and Kutenai Indians reported they some-



times ate the fruits raw with sugar and cream or milk as a dessert. Today, all people harvest them for jams and jellies, and make wine from the berries.

Harvest them after first frost, and it's still good to add sugar or another fruit in the mix for jams and jellies (see recipes below). Cree people crushed the grapes, drained the juice and sweetened it for a "good grape drink." For a warm, refreshing drink, some Indian tribes crushed the fruit, mixed them with sugar and water, heated and added cinnamon.

Generally, following a recipe for gooseberry or rhubarb wine, a tart, dry wine can be made. This could only happen in a year or area of high yield to harvest enough fruits to make wine. Oregon grapes can be made into pies, muffins or pancakes. Resourceful cooks only need to know a food is edible and not poisonous to experiment with its use. Oregon grapes are such a fruit—so experiment!

**OREGON GRAPE
or HOLLY GRAPE**
Berberis repens Lindl. or
Mahonia repens (Lindl.) D. Don.
Cree: **Wi-sah-ki-mi-nah**

MEDICINE

Fruit, leaves, stems and roots were found to have medicinal uses by Indians and pioneers. The effective elements are two-fold. In the yellow bark and roots are some strong antioxidants, which slow up the growth (production of cells) of such things as the skin disease, psoriasis. In the roots are the bitter, organic alkaloid elements, the most important of which is berberine, stimulating some involuntary muscle movements, important in many healthy body functions.

Early on, the Plains Indians discovered healing, medicinal uses for many of the plants in their environment, passing many of them on to settlers. Without help from scientific research, they didn't know *why*—only *that* they worked. Modern chemical analysis has affirmed the experimental findings and curing efforts of these early peoples.

TEAS & TONICS

So it was with the Oregon grape for food and medicine. Their first uses were as tonics, to enrich their blood as the Kutenai believed, as a diuretic and stimulant in the treatment of kidney troubles, or to improve appetite (thence health), as well as for stomach troubles. A tea made from the roots was drunk for the above ailments and as cough medicine.

Native Americans of many tribes had treatments they found effective for venereal disease.

Oregon Grape Jelly

For a batch of jelly, gather and cook enough grapes to make at least two cups of juice when squeezed through a cloth bag. Add 2 cups of apple juice to make 4 cups total. Add 1 box of commercial pectin, bring to a boil. Add 4 cups sugar, boil 2 minutes. Pour into glass jelly jars, cool and seal with paraffin.

Oregon Grape Jam

*Pick and cook and mash enough grapes to make 2 cups of pulp
Add 2-3 cups of cooked and mashed apples
Add 1 box of pectin, bring to boil
Add 5-6 cups sugar
Boil 4 minutes, pour into jelly jars, cool and seal with paraffin*

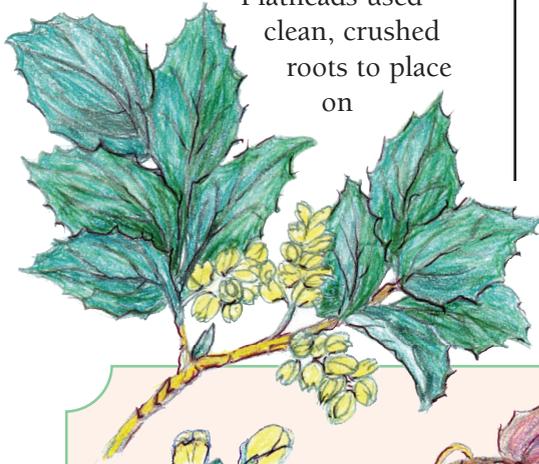
Flathead Indians and early pioneers drank the tea for both gonorrhea and syphilis. Flatheads also drank the tea to treat rheumatism, as a contraceptive, and to help with delivery of the placenta after childbirth.

It was found to be effective in treating chronic liver malfunction, and has shown to be mildly beneficial for thyroid function. Recently, a decoction from the bitter bark of the roots has been used as a laxative, an *alterative* (building resistance to disease), and as an overall tonic for treatment and prevention of various ills.

POTIONS, SALVES & DYE

Indian people and pioneers both knew of Oregon grape's antiseptic properties.

Flatheads used clean, crushed roots to place on



cuts and other external wounds. Later, research revealed their antiseptic and antibacterial properties. The National Standard Dispensatory has now listed it for use as a tonic, stimulant, antiperiodic (suppressing recurrence of a periodic disease), and antiscorbutic (preventing scurvy), and as a treatment for dyspepsia (digestive disorder), diarrhea, dysentery, psoriasis, eczema, and chronic uterine disease.

The publication does warn that an overdose can be fatal due to the alkaloids. In modern medical practice, extracts from the bark are used as a laxative and general tonic.

A brilliant yellow dye can be made by boiling the roots and bark. The yellow can be seen if the bark is pulled away. The dye is made by shredding the bark and boiling it.

CULTIVATION

Low-growing, creeping Oregon or holly grape provides good, perennial groundcover and is an excellent choice for high-altitude gardens. Plant it



Ghost Bear, a Crow Indian • Photographed in Montana by Edward Curtis in 1908 • PHOTO CANVAS ART, eBay

in partial shade, and in moist, fertile, well-drained and acidic soil. It will tolerate full shade, but flower and berry production will be reduced. The foliage is great as a green filler in fresh floral arrangements, especially as holly for the holidays. ■



DR. ELNORA (STENERSEN) OLD COYOTE, age 86, grew up in Eastern Montana and married John M. Old Coyote, a full-blooded Crow Indian. With the help of many tribal people, she has been researching and teaching the use of native plants for many years. She has studied and written about over 300 Montana plants. Included here are her notes on ecology and folklore, and her original sketches and poems. Elnora lives in Huntley and can be reached at (406) 348-2474.

Oregon or Holly Grape

grows in the Rockies close along the ground, no more than 8 to 12 inches tall. It has persistent leaves that are evergreen all spring and summer, becoming red throughout the season of long sun rays, returning again to green in the spring. The red of winter resulted in this grape being called, *la hierba de la sangre* or “herb of the blood” by Spanish explorers.

The leaves are holly-like and spine-tipped, compound, usually 3 to 5 (as many as 7) on a leaflet; leaflets alternate on the twigs. Leaves are slightly thickened, dark-green above, glossy and smooth; paler green underneath, dull and net-veined. The beautiful, yellow flowers have six stamens opposite six petals. The six sepals are petal-like, in two rows with three small bracts under them. The flowers turn to blue-purple berry-like fruits, very acid until frost, when they sweeten a little.