

Barberry (*Berberis vulgaris*)

Location: Europe and North America.

Description: This is a thorny bush, which produces small yellow flowers. All parts of the bark, thorns and

flowers are used medicinally.

Properties: This herb is primarily recognized for fighting bacterial infections. It can also be used to stimulate the

immune system, and fight inflammations.

Uses: Barberry can be used to treat burns, cuts, abrasions, all types of infections, diarrhea, gallstones, liver

problems, peptic ulcers, yeast infections, gastritis and kidney stones.

Doses: You can find Barberry in capsule form, tinctures, tablets, and ointments.

Warnings: Barberry should be avoided in cases of food poisoning. Men who are planning to have children shouldn't take Barberry. People with diabetes should avoid the use of Barberry without supervision. Pregnant women or those who are nursing should also avoid the use of Barberry

Also known as

Berberis vulgaris, European Barberry, trailing mahonia, berberis

Introduction

The barberry is a tall shrub with gray, thorny branches. Bright yellow flowers bloom in the late spring become dark, drooping bunches of red berries in the fall. Puckery but less bitter than cranberries, ripe barberries can be used to make jam. Both the berries and the bark are used in healing. Medicinal use of barberry dates back at least to the time of ancient Egypt, when it was combined with fennel seed to prevent plague. In Europe and the US, Barberry has been used as a bitter tonic, antipyretic, and antihemorrhagic. It has also been used in China in the same fashion, but also for its antimalarial qualities.

Constituents

The barberry contains its namesake chemical berberine, also found in coptis, goldenseal, Oregon grape root, and turmeric. The herb also contains the B-vitamin thiamine, vitamin C, the carotenoids beta-carotene, lutein, and zeaxanthin, chromium, cobalt, and zinc.

Parts Used

The whole root, root bark, aerial parts and sometimes the fruiting body.

Typical Preparations

The whole herb barberry is available in capsules, fluid extracts, tinctures, and ointments. Dried roots of barberry can also be used in tea.

Precautions

Adults should limit use of barberry to seven consecutive days at a time, waiting at least a week before using barberry again. This gives the natural, helpful bacteria of the intestine a chance to recover. Taking vitamin B6 supplements can give infectious bacteria resistance to the antibacterial toxins in the herb. Barberry is often given to children with success, but should be used with caution, no more than three consecutive doses followed by a day without the herb. Not recommended while pregnant or nursing.

Botanical: *Berberis vulgaris* (LINN.)

Family: N.O. Berberidaceae

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---**Synonyms**---Berbery. Pipperidge Bush. *Berberis Dumetorum*.

---**Parts Used**---Bark, root-bark.

---**Habitat**---The Common Barberry, a well-known, bushy shrub, with pale-green deciduous leaves, is found in copses and hedges in some parts of England, though a doubtful native in Scotland and Ireland. It is generally distributed over the greater part of Europe, Northern Africa and temperate Asia. As an ornamental shrub, it is fairly common in gardens.

---**Description**---The stems are woody, 8 to 10 feet high, upright and branched, smooth, slightly grooved, brittle, with a white pith and covered with an ash-coloured bark.

The leaves of the barren shoots of the year are alternate, 1 to 1 1/2 inch long, shortly petioled, presenting various gradations from leaves into spines, into which they become transformed in the succeeding year. The primary leaves on the woody shoots are reduced to three-forked spines, with an enlarged base. The secondary leaves are in fascicles from the axil of these spines and are simple, oval, tapering at the base into a short foot-stalk, the margins finely serrate, with the teeth terminating in small spines.

The flowers are small, pale yellow, arranged in pendulous racemes, produced from the fascicles of leaves, towards the ends of the branches. Their scent is not altogether agreeable when near, but by no means offensive at a distance. Their stamens show remarkable sensibility when touched springing and taking a position closely applied to the pistil. Insects of various kinds are exceedingly fond of the Barberry flower. Linnaeus observed that when bees in search of honey touch the filaments, they spring from the petal and strike the anther against the stigma, thereby exploding the pollen. In the original position of the stamens, lying in the concavity of the petals, they are sheltered from rain, and there remain till some insect unavoidably touches them. As it is chiefly in fine, sunny weather that insects are

on the wing, the pollen is also in such weather most fit for the purpose of impregnation, hence this curious contrivance of nature for fertilizing the seeds at the most suitable moment.

The berries are about 1/2 inch long, oblong and slightly curved; when ripe, of a fine, red colour and pleasantly acidulous.

The leaves are also acid, and have sometimes been employed for the same purposes as the fruit. Gerard recommends the leaves 'to season meat with and instead of a salad.'

Cows, sheep and goats are said to eat the shrub, horses and swine to refuse it, and birds, also, seldom touch the fruit, on account of its acidity; in this respect it approaches the tamarind.

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---History---In many parts of Europe, farmers have asserted that wheat planted within three or four hundred yards of a Barberry bush became infected with rust or mildew, but this belief has not been substantiated by recent observations.

Professor Henslow (*Floral Rambles in Highways and Byways*) writes:

'It was thought by farmers in the middle of the last century that the Barberry blighted wheat if it grew near the hedge. Botanists then ridiculed the idea; but in a sense the farmers were right! What they observed was that if a Barberry bush grew, say, at the corner of a wheatfield the leaves of the wheat became "rusty," i.e. they were streaked with a red colour when close to the bush; and that this "red rust" extended steadily across the field till the whole was rusted. The interpretation was at that time unknown. A fungus attacks the leaves of the Barberry, making orange-coloured spots. It throws off minute spores which do attack the wheat. These develop parasitic threads within the leaf, from which arise the red rust-spores: subsequently dark brown or black spores, consisting of two cells, called wheat-mildew, appear. After a time these throw off red, onecelled spores which attack the Barberry; and so a cycle is completed. Though it was not really the bush which blighted the wheat, the latter suffered through its agency as the primary host plant.'

---Uses---The Barberry used to be cultivated for the sake of the fruit, which was pickled and used for garnishing dishes. The ripe berries can be made into an agreeable, refreshing jelly by boiling them with an equal weight of fine sugar to a proper consistence and then straining it. They were formerly used as a sweetmeat, and in sugar-plums, or comfits. It is from these berries that the delicious confitures d'epine vinette, for which Rouen is famous, are commonly prepared.

The roots boiled in Iye, will dye wool yellow, and in Poland they dye leather of a beautiful yellow colour with the bark of the root. The inner bark of the stems will also dye linen of a fine yellow, with the assistance of alum.

Provincially, the plant is also termed Pipperidge Bush, from 'pepon,' a pip, and 'rouge,' red, as descriptive of the scarlet, juiceless fruit.

Berberis is the Arabic name of the fruit, signifying a shell, and many authors believe the name is derived from this word, because the leaves are glossy, like the inside of an oyster-shell.

Among the Italians, the Barberry bears the name of Holy Thorn, because it is thought to have formed part of the crown of thorns made for our Saviour.

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---Cultivation---It is generally propagated by *suckers*, which are put out in plenty from the roots, but these plants are subject to send out suckers in greater plenty than those which are propagated by *layers*,

therefore the latter method should be preferred.

The best time for laying down the branches is in autumn (October), and the young shoots of the same year are the best- these will be well rooted by the next autumn, when they may be taken off and planted where they are designed to remain.

Barberry may also be propagated by ripened *cuttings*, taken also in autumn and planted in sandy soil, in a cold frame, or by *seeds*, sown in spring, or preferably in autumn, 1 inch deep in a sheltered border when, if fresh from the pulp, or berry, they will germinate in the open in the following spring.

---Parts Used---Stem-bark and root-bark. The stem-bark is collected by shaving and is dried spread out in trays in the sun, or on shelves in a well-ventilated greenhouse or in an airy attic or loft, warmed either by sun or by the artificial heat of a stove, the door and window being left open by day to ensure a warm current of air. The bark may be also strung on threads and hung across the room.

When dried, the pieces of bark are in small irregular portions, about 2 inches long and 1/2 inch wide, and of a dark-yellowish grey colour externally, and marked with shallow longitudinal furrows. It frequently bears the minute, black 'fruits' of lichen. The bark is dark yellowish brown on the inner surface separating in layers of bast fibres.

The bark has a slight odour and a bitter taste, and colours the saliva yellow when chewed.

The root-bark is greyish brown externally and is dried in a similar manner after being peeled off. When dry, it breaks with a short fracture. It contains the same constituents as the stem-bark and possesses similar qualities.

---Constituents---The chief constituent of Barberry bark is Berberine, a yellow crystalline, bitter alkaloid, one of the few that occurs in plants belonging to several different natural orders. Other constituents are oxyacanthine, berbamine, other alkaloidal matter, a little tannin, also wax, resin, fat, albumin, gum and starch.

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---Medicinal Action and Uses---Tonic, purgative, antiseptic. It is used in the form of a liquid extract, given as decoction, infusion or tincture, but generally a salt of the alkaloid Berberine is preferred.

As a bitter stomachic tonic, it proves an excellent remedy for dyspepsia and functional derangement of the liver, regulating the digestive powers, and if given in larger doses, acting as a mild purgative and removing constipation.

It is used in all cases of jaundice, general debility and biliousness, and for diarrhoea.

---Preparations---Powdered bark, 1/4 teaspoonful several times daily. Fluid extract, 1/2 to 1 drachm. Solid extract, 5 to 10 grains.

It possesses febrifuge powers and is used as a remedy for intermittent fevers. It also forms an excellent gargle for a sore mouth.

A good lotion for application to cutaneous eruptions has also been made from it.

The berries contain citric and malic acids, and possess astringent and anti-scorbutic properties. They are useful in inflammatory fevers, especially typhus, also in bilious disorders and scurvy, and in the form of a jelly are very refreshing in irritable sore throat, for which also a syrup of Barberries made with water, proves an excellent astringent gargle.

The Egyptians are said still to employ a diluted juice of the berries in pestilential fevers, and Simon

Paulli relates that he was cured of a malignant fever by drinking an infusion of the berries sweetened with sugar and syrup of roses.

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RECIPES

---Barberry Drops---

The black tops must be cut off; then roast the fruit before the fire till soft enough to pulp with a silver spoon through a sieve into a china basin; then set the basin in a sauce pan of water, the top of which will just fit it, or on a hot hearth, and stir it till it grows thick. When cold, put to every pint 1 1/2 lb. of sugar, the finest double-refined, pounded and sifted through a lawn sieve, which must be covered with a fine linen to prevent its wasting while sifting. Beat the sugar and juice together 3 1/2 hours if a large quantity, but 2 1/2 for less; then drop it on sheets of white, thick paper, the size of the drops sold in the shops. Some fruit is not so sour and then less sugar is necessary. To know if there be enough, mix till well incorporated and then drop; if it runs, there is not enough sugar, and if there is too much it will be rough. A dry room will suffice to dry them. No metal must touch the juice but the point of a knife, just to take the drop off the end of the wooden spoon, and then as little as possible.

---To prepare Barberries for Tartlets---

Pick Barberries that have no stones, from the stalks, and to every pound weigh 3/4 lb. of lump sugar; put the fruit into a *stone* jar, and either set it on a hot hearth or in a saucepan of water, and let them simmer very slowly till soft; put them and the sugar into a preserving-pan, and boil them gently 15 minutes. Use no metal but silver.

---Barberries in Bunches---

Have ready bits of flat white wood, 3 inches long and 1/4 inch wide. Tie the stalks of the fruit on the stick from *within* an inch of one end to beyond the other, so as to make them look handsome. Simmer them in some syrup two successive days, covering them each time with it when cold. When they look clear they are simmered enough. The third day do them like other candy fruit.

Mrs. Beeton (an old edition) says:

'Barberries are also used as a dry sweetmeat, and in sugar-plums or comfits; are pickled with vinegar and are used for various culinary purposes. They are well calculated to allay heat and thirst in persons afflicted with fevers. The berries arranged on bunches of nice curled parsley, make an exceedingly pretty garnish for supper-dishes, particularly for white meats, like boiled fowl à la Béchamel; the three colours, scarlet, green and white contrasting so well, and producing a very good effect.'