

Oregon Grape Root (*Mahonia aquifolium*, *Mahonia repens*)

Common Name: Alegria, California barberry, japonica, mahonia, mountain grape, mountain holly, pepperidge, sourberry, sowberry, yellow root.

Location: *M. repens* is found in dry places such as Ponderosa pine ecosystems; *M. Nervosa* is 1 to 2 feet tall with holly, found in lower elevations in coastal forests and interior cedar-hemlock ecosystems; *M. aquifolium*, known as Oregon grape, is three to five feet tall.

Description: All have very beautiful flowers and green berries that ripen to a blue-purple color. The name Oregon grape comes from its use as a medicine and food along the Oregon Trail. Its popularity as a food and medicine nearly led to its extinction in the late 19th century. Both the leaves and root bark are used medicinally.

Properties: The best known of the herb's active constituents is berberine, a chemical that Oregon grape root shares with barberry, coptis, and goldenseal.

Uses: Oregon grape root is a bacterial infection fighter. Used both internally and externally, it is healing to the skin, eyes, and the mucous membranes. It is excellent for skin problems, helps to purify the blood and deliver oxygen, and stimulates the functioning of the gallbladder and liver. It stimulates and improves digestive function. Benefits of Oregon grape root for specific health conditions include treatment of acne, allergic rashes, eczema, and psoriasis, diarrhea and gastritis.

Doses: Oregon grape root is available in capsules, ointments, tablets, and tinctures.

Warnings: Oregon grape root is mildly sedating. You should use it with caution if you are taking an anti-anxiety drug. It may also lower blood sugar, so you should use it with caution if you have diabetes and have not used the herb before. Oregon grape should be avoided during pregnancy.

## Oregon Grape Root and Powder Profile

### Also known as

*Mahonia* spp. (*Mahonia aquifolium* and *Berberis aquifolium*)

### Introduction

Oregon grape is a tall, evergreen, flowering shrub that grows among the firs, spruces, and pines of the mountainous American Northwest. The state flower of Oregon, Oregon grape bears fruit, but "grapes" is an inaccurate description. Oregon grape root is a useful substitute for goldenseal, which has been over harvested in the wild. It is not as fussy about its habitat than the closely related barberry, and easier to find. As a purely bitter herb, Oregon grape root is used easily with Traditional Chinese Medicine, having the same function and only a little less potency than coptis. Like coptis, Oregon grape root is useful in treating the various symptoms of "damp heat," such as: ´ Abdominal fullness and distention ´ Constipation alternating with diarrhea ´ Foul-smelling loose stools, ´ General feeling of heaviness, ´ Nausea, ´ Reduced appetite, ´ Reduced thirst although with the sensation of dry mouth, ´ Sticky, thick, and yellow or green mucous discharges, ´ Watery, oozing skin eruptions, and ´ "Red" symptoms: red tongue, hot flushes, bad temper, rapid pulse. (Practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine are likely to note that Oregon grape root is less appropriate than coptis in treating syndromes in which there is a

"deficiency of Yin," an inherent tendency to lose fluids.) Oregon grape root's best-researched application in modern herbal medicine, however, is in the treatment of chronic inflammatory skin conditions, such as psoriasis.

## Constituents

Oregon grape root contains berberine, also found in barberry, coptis, and goldenseal. The herb also contains phytochemicals with similar activity, including columbamine, hydrastine, jatrorrhizine, oxyacanthine, and tetrahydroberberine, as well as tannins. It does not contain the range of nutrient vitamins and minerals found in barberry.

## Parts Used

Root

## Typical Preparations

Topical creams containing 10% tincture of Oregon grape root. Also used as tea, tincture and it may be administered in capsule form. Proper dosage is important:

- Tea: 1 to 2 grams (1/2 to 1 teaspoon) of dried root steeped in 150 ml (approximately 2/3 of a cup) of hot water for 10 to 15 minutes three times daily. This is not the same dosage as for the chopped herb.
- Tincture: 3 to 6 ml. (1/2 to 1-1/2 tsp) three times daily (but no more than three doses of any kind of Oregon grape root product per day).
- For skin disorders: 10% tincture in ointment, applied to the skin three times daily

## Summary

Traditional herbal medicine uses Oregon grape root to stop diarrhea. It slows the passage of stool through the small intestine, but it also keeps bacteria from implanting themselves in the lining. Oregon grape root may also give the immune system a mild boost by encouraging phagocytosis, the engulfing and digesting of bacteria by the white blood cells known as microphages. Oregon grape root and other herbs that contain berberine are scientifically proven to protect against bacteria, viruses, fungi, protozoans, helminthes (worms), and chlamydia. Conditions treated by Oregon grape root include bacterial diarrhea, intestinal parasites, and ocular trachoma. Oregon grape root may increase blood platelet counts and counteract the proliferation of cancerous tumors of the bladder and colon. It has a sedative effect on the smooth muscles lining the digestive tract and can relieve stomach cramps and abdominal pain. Why use Oregon grape root as a whole herb? Why not just take a berberine concentrate? Oregon grape root contains tannins that cross link proteins in the linings of the nose and throat, or in the digestive tract, to seal them against infection. The tannins may also explain the herb's usefulness in treating psoriasis, a condition characterized by the over-rapid multiplication of cells in the skin. In at least one clinical study, a cream containing Oregon grape root eased inflammation, irritation, and itching.

## Precautions

Adults should limit use of Oregon grape root or any other herb containing berberine (barberry, coptis, or goldenseal) to seven consecutive days at a time, waiting at least a week before using the herb 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. Do not take Oregon grape root if you are taking antibiotics for diarrhea. The herb is not a problem for nursing mothers unless the baby has jaundice, however it should not be used while pregnant.

**Botanical: *Berberis aquifolium* (PURSH.)**

**Family: N.O. Berberidaceae**

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---**Synonyms**---*Mahonia aquifolia*. Holly-leaved Barberry. Oregon Grape Root.

---**Part Used**---Root.

---**Habitat**---Western United States.

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---**Description**---Several varieties of the subgenus *Mahonia* contribute to the drug of commerce under the name of *Berberis aquifolium*. It is a quickly-growing shrub about 6 feet high: the oddly compound leaves have no spine at the base; they are evergreen and shining. The flowers grow in terminal racemes, are small and yellowish-green in colour, and the purple berries are three- to nine-seeded. The bark is brown on the surface and yellow beneath. The root is from 1/2 inch in diameter to 3 inches at the base of the stem, odourless, and with a bitter taste. The shrub was introduced into England from North America in 1823. It was formerly known as *Mahonia aquifolia* and is very hardy.

---**Constituents**---The principal constituent is a high proportion of berberin, and there is also oxycanthin.

---**Medicinal Action and Uses**---Tonic and alterative, recommended in psoriasis, syphilis and impure blood-conditions. It may be used like colombo, berberis, etc., in dyspepsia and chronic mucous complaints. In constipation it is combined with *Cascara Sagrada*. It improves digestion and absorption.

---**Preparation**---Fluid extract, 10 to 30 drops.

---**Other Species**---

*B. nervosa* and *B. repens* are frequently found in the drug.