BARBERRY

Berberis vulgaris
[BEAR-ber-is vul-GAY-ris]
(also B thunbergii)

Family: Berberidaceae

Names: American barberry, common barberry, dragon grape, guild tree, jaundice barberry, sow berry, berberry, berberis, jaundice berry, pepperidge bush, pipperidge bush, holy thorn, gouan, wood sour, yellow root; Kwasnica Pospolita, Berberys (Polish); Berberitze (German); Epine-vinette (French); Berberize, Sauerborn (German); Agracejo (Spanish), zereshk, sereshk (Farsi); k’ots’akhuri (Georgian);

Description: A perennial deciduous shrub growing from 3-10 feet with leathery leaves that are obovate, oval form, terminated by soft bristle, about 2 inches long and 1/3 as wide, and edible red, dark-blue or black berries in autumn. It has smooth gray bark, long spines and hanging clusters of bright yellow flowers that bloom in spring. The blossoms are ¼ inch wide, with six petals. The roots are bright yellow in color.

Cultivation: Native to Europe, barberry is naturalized in North America. Prefers neutral to calcareous soil in sun or partial shade. Propagate by seed in autumn, or by softwood or semiripe cuttings in summer. Cut back old stems and straggly growths in late winter. May be attacked by Armillaria root rot. As a host of wheat rust, many Berberis may not be grown in some states and certain countries. Fruits are gathered in autumn and used fresh; stems and roots are collected in autumn after a frost or two and stripped of bark when fresh. Clean and slice the roots thinly, or strip the root bark off if only the bark is to be used. Spread the root or root bark out on screens or other appropriate material. Store when completely dry. Bark and roots are dried for use in decoctions and liquid extracts, and as powder.

History: The common name Barberry is a corruption of the Latin word berberis for the plant, and in its turn berberis may be derived from the Arabic name for the fruit. In ancient Egypt, Berberis berries were macerated with fennel seed to make a drink for fevers. The berries are extremely sour but have been used in the past to make preserves – the French confiture d’épine vinette is one example. After the plant was introduced from Europe to the eastern US, it was used by the Catawba for peptic ulcers. Ayurvedic healers prescribed it for dysentery and hepatic diarrhea. Egyptians used diluted barberry juice to treat the
symptoms of the plague. In some Italian cultures, this herbe is known as Holy Thorn. It is believed that it provided the crown of thorns worn by the Christ. Herbalists of the Renaissance relied on the signatures theory: based on the yellow color of the bark and the shape of the vesicle of the fruit, they deduced that this plant was effective in treating the liver and gallbladder.

**Constituents:** Isoquinoline alkaloids, including berberine, berbamine, oxyacanthine, jatrorrhizine, columbamine, palmatine, isotetrandine, bervulcine and magnoflorine; tannin, resin, fat, starch. Berberine is strongly antibacterial and amebicidal, and stimulates bile secretion. Berbamine is strongly antibacterial. Many of the alkaloids are thought to be cancer-inhibiting. The berries contain sugars, organic acids, pectin and vitamin C.

**Properties:** hepatic, alterative, laxative. A very bitter, sedative herb that is highly effective against many disease-causing organisms. It simulates the liver, spleen, and uterus; lowers fever and blood pressure; controls bleeding; and reduces inflammation. Anticancer effects have been demonstrated. The berries are laxative and refrigerant

**Energetics:** cold, bitter

**Meridians/Organs affected:** liver, stomach, colon

**Medicinal Uses:** Solvent in water. Barberry acts on the gallbladder to improve bile flow and ameliorate conditions such as gallbladder pain, gallstones, and jaundice. Barberry’s strongly antiseptic property is of value in cases of amebic dysentery, cholera and other similar gastrointestinal infections. Barberry is one of the mildest and best liver tonics known, good for jaundice, hepatitis and diabetes.

The berberine in barberry has remarkable infection-fighting properties. Studies around the world show it kills microorganisms that cause wound infections (Staphylococci, Streptococci), diarrhea (Salmonella, Shigella), dysentery (Endamoeba histolytica), cholera (Vibrio cholerae), giardiasis (Giardia lamblia), urinary tract infections (Escherichia coli) and vaginal yeast infections (Candida albicans). Berberine may also fight infection by stimulating the immune system. Studies show that it activates the macrophages, white blood cells that devour harmful microorganisms. In Germany, a berberine preparation, Ophthiole, is used to treat sensitive eyes, inflamed lids, and pinkeye (conjunctivitis). Barberry contains chemicals that may help reduce elevated blood pressure by enlarging blood vessels.

Traditional Russian healers recommended it for inflammations, high blood pressure, and abnormal uterine bleeding. The 19th-century American Eclectic physicians prescribed barberry as a purgative and treatment for jaundice, dysentery, eye infections, cholera, fevers and “impurities of the blood,” a euphemism for syphilis. Barberry was an ingredient in the Hoxsey Cancer Formula.

The bark is astringent, antidiarrheal, and healing to the intestinal wall—in short, barberry has a strong, highly beneficial effect on the digestive system as a whole. It helps in the treatment of chronic skin conditions such as eczema and psoriasis. The decoction makes a gentle and effective wash for the eyes, although it must be diluted sufficiently before use. Liquid of the chewed root was placed on injuries and on wounds, while cuts and bruises were washed with a root decoction. A preparation of the bark or berries will be useful as a gargle for sore mouth and chronic ophthalmia. It has been successfully used to treat Leishmaniasis (infections transmitted by sandflies). It has the ability to reduce an enlarged spleen and acts against malaria.

A combination of barberry and turmeric is used in Ayurvedic medicine to regulate liver energy in a way that is very similar to the use of bupleurum in Chinese herbalism.

According to many French scientists, the berberine from the barberry has a chemical
makeup that is close to that of morphine. It could be tried to detoxify opium addicts.

Solvent: water

Combinations:
Gall-bladder disease: fringetree bark and black root

Remedies:
Decoction: use ½ tsp of powdered root bark, boiled in a cup of water for 15-30 minutes. Drink cool. Drink up to 1 cup a day. Mask the bitter taste with honey or an herbal beverage blend.
Compress: soak a clean cloth in a barberry infusion to treat pinkeye

Depurative Wine and Tonic: 4 cups red wine, 1 cup freshly crushed barberry berries, 1 cup raw brown sugar. Combine the wine and the berries. Macerate for 1 month away from light. Stir regularly. Strain and add the sugar. Shake well. Can be stored for 6 months. Drink 1 oz pure or diluted in water, before each meal to enrich the blood, drain the gallbladder, increase the number of platelets or combat a microbial infection.

Topical Wash for Skin and Gum Abscesses
1-2 tsp barberries
1 Tbsp white oak bark
1 tsp Echinacea root
1 tsp granulated Oregon grape root
2 cups boiling water

Combine the herbs in a glass container. Pour the boiling water over the herbs and soak for 3-4 hours; strain. Use three times a day as a wash. If you are using this tea to treat a gum abscess, be sure to swish the liquid around in your mouth for several minutes before spitting it out.

Allergy Tea
1 tsp barberry root
1 tsp Oregon grape root
1 cup water

Combine the herbs in a pan and cover with the water. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 30 minutes. Strain. Take one-third cup three times daily.

Topical Wash for Canker Sores
½ cup barberry root tea
½ cup white oak tea
½ cup Echinacea tea
½ cup Oregon grape root tea

Combine the above ingredients in a glass container with a lid. Use three times a day as a mouthwash. Be sure to swish the liquid around in your mouth for several minutes.

Psoriasis Tea
1 tsp barberry root
1 tsp Oregon grape root
2 cups boiling water

Combine the above herbs in a nonmetallic container and cover with the boiling water; steep for 20-30 minutes; strain. Drink a tablespoon at a time, up to one cup a day.

Sinusitis Relief Tea
1 tsp bayberry root
1 tsp white willow bark
2 cups boiling water

Combine the above herbs and cover with the boiling water; steep for 15 minutes; take warm, up to two cups a day.

Cavity Prevention Wash
1 tsp bayberry root bark
1 tsp goldenseal root
1 tsp chaparral leaves
2 cups water

Combine the above ingredients in a pan and cover with the water; bring to a boil and boil for 15 minutes; cool and strain. To use, place one to two tablespoons of the solution in your mouth and swish around. Hold in your mouth as long as possible before spitting out. Use as needed.

Hangover Tea
1 tsp ripe barberry berries
1 tsp Oregon grape root
2 cups boiling water
Combine the herbs in a nonmetallic container and cover with the boiling water; steep for 30 minutes; cool and strain. Take up to one cup a day, diluted in plenty of cool water.

Topical Skin Wash
½ cup barberry tea
½ cup white oak tea
½ cup Echinacea tea
½ cup Oregon grape root tea
Combine the above ingredients in a glass container with a lid. Use three times a day as a topical skin wash.

Homeopathy: Tincture of the bark of the root used for biliary colic, bladder affections, calculus, dysmenorrhea, fevers, gall-stones, gravel, herpes, joint affections, leucorrhoea, liver disorder, opthalmia, renal colic, rheumatism, affections of spleen, tumors, disorders of urine, vaginismus. It has an affinity with most tissues. Symptoms which it produces are liable to alternate violently, e.g. feverish conditions with thirst can quickly give way to prostration without any desire for water.

Culinary: Ripe fruits are sour, with a high vitamin C content. They are usually better cooked because of their acidity. They were once made into jelly for mutton dishes and pickled or candied for decoration. The very young leaves of barberries are slightly acid and good raw as long as they are still tender. They can be added to salads. The berries are used to flavor ground meat or Persian rice dishes.

Toxicity: Take only under professional supervision, for not more than 4-6 weeks at a time. Do not take during pregnancy. Barberry should not be given to children under age 2.

Ritual Uses: Herbe of Mars. An excellent herbe for Christian practitioners to incorporate into ritual work done during the season of Lent.

Other Uses: The yellow root was an important dye for baskets, buckskins and fabric among Native Americans. Spanish-Americans used the yellow root to make crucifixes.

Dye: ¼ - ½ pot barberry roots and large twigs
1 lb wool
4 gal water
Cut the root or branches up into small pieces, cover them with water and boil for at least 2 hours. Strain out the plant material and add water to make up 4 gallons. No mordanting is necessary in dyeing with barberry. Simply enter the wet wool that has been put into successively warmer rinses and simmer for 30 minutes or so. Cool and rinse again. Color: bright yellow

Recipes:
Barberry Wine
Express enough of the fruits to yield a quart of juice, to which add 3 quarts of water and 3 lbs of sugar and allow the mixture to ferment. This makes a pleasant drink when mixed with 3 or 4 times the amount of water.

Preserved Barberries
To preserve barberries, pick the fruits, take their weight of loaf sugar and put them in a jar. Set them in a kettle of boiling water till the sugar is melted and then let them stand all night. The next day, put them into a preserving pan and boil them 15 minutes, then put them into jars, tie them closely, and set them by for use.

Barberry Jam
3 lbs of ripe fruit
2 cups of cold water
1 cup of granulated sugar per cup of juice pulp
Place 3 lbs of fully ripened and cleaned barberries into a saucepan and add 2 cups of water. Cook the mixture slowly over a moderate heat until the fruit softens. When thoroughly cooked, remove from the heat and pass the mixture through a fine sieve or strainer. This will remove the skins and seeds. Measure the juice pulp mixture, place into a saucepan and add 1 cup of granulated sugar for each cup of pulp. Mix well bring to a boil, and hold there for 15 minutes, stirring constantly.
Remove the foam and pour into hot sterile jelly jars. Seal while hot. (Wild Preserves)

**Pickled Barberry Relish**

1 cup of ripe fruit
2 cups of granulated sugar
4 cups of cider vinegar
½ tsp of ground allspice
1 tsp of whole cloves
1 stick of cinnamon

Wash and stem 1 pint of fully ripened barberries. Place into a deep saucepan, add 2 cups of granulated sugar and 4 cups of cider vinegar. Next add ½ tsp of ground allspice, tsp of whole cloves and 1 stick of cinnamon. Bring to a boil and hold there until the fruits lose their color. Remove from the heat and allow to cool. Strain the mixture and put into hot sterile pint jars and seal. (Wild Preserves)

**Barberry Dessert**

Bring to a boil 8 oz washed berries in 8 oz water over medium heat. Stirring constantly, crush the fruit while adding 8 oz sugar, return to boil, lower heat and stir until fruit is soft, about 5 minutes. Purée this in a blender and immediately stir in 1 envelop unflavored gelatin until completely dissolved. Fold in 1 pint vanilla ice cream until smooth, plus 1 oz Grand Marnier or Cointreau and refrigerate until set, about 1 hour. Serve with vanilla wafers. (Just Weeds)

**References:**

- Eat the Weeds, Ben Charles Harris, 1972, Barre Publishers


**Sources:**

- Crimson Sage, [http://www.crimson-sage.com](http://www.crimson-sage.com)