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The grapes of worth

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: This fresh batch of Oregon grape root vodka tincture is already deep orange after a half hour.
(Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

Regenerative agriculture acknowledges its place in an intact ecology. To the extent that an ecology is balanced, it offers us food, medicine, material and fuel on which we should reflect with humility.

Some believe we're exiled from Eden and must labor for our every need. But inasmuch as we do not pave and build over it, what is "undeveloped" has yet so much to offer us.

Oregon grape (*Berberis* spp. or *Mahonia* spp.) carpets our young timberlands. On the Olympic Peninsula, the species is likely *aquifolia*, *nervosa* or *repens*. It has medicinal uses that coincidentally correspond with its harvest time, and it's so abundant you can comfortably harvest some in the five to 120 minutes between autumn rains.

Around this time of year we probably slow down and eat more. How fortunate that Oregon grape root is best harvested from midsummer to winter, and that it functions as a "bitter tonic for impaired salivary and gastric secretions, a stimulant to liver and skin protein metabolism, and an antimicrobial for the skin and digestive tract," according to Michael Moore's book "Medicinal Plants of the Pacific West."

One of Oregon graperoot's active ingredients, berberine, is what gives the endangered medicinal goldenseal root its vibrant yellow color. Berberine's anticancer, anti-inflammatory and digestive support functions are the subject of much current research. Most Oregon grape research at present involves its topical uses for treating psoriasis.

I don't take any pharmaceuticals and I don't practice medicine, but then neither do indigenous Oregon grape users. The Quinault, Swinomish and Samish, among others, have used the root medicinally for generations.

One can just as easily buy — from reputable commercial outfits such as Herb Pharm — as produce these tonics. With these warnings in mind, consider what this folk medicine might do for the responsible user.

A bitter tonic can be made of roots using vodka or glycerine. When harvesting, it is polite to say thanks or make an offering of poem or song. I brush off the dirt, grind away the woody outer bark with the spine of a knife, and skin only the brightest yellow inner bark to infuse.

Per Moore, the fresh root should be steeped at one part chopped root to two parts 50% alcohol, or dry root at 1:5. He recommends taking 15-30 drops up to four times a day, before eating or retiring, or 30-45 drops up to three times a day. The former dosage is a hepatic tonic and the latter is a liver stimulant.

The same formulation can be used as a mouthwash. I suspect it would work for indigestion as well and will try it on the next such occasion. I spilled a little while making this batch and even a taste of it set me salivating.

If you find the tincture too bitter, a tea might also work for the same complaints, at 2 teaspoons of dried cut bark or root per cup of boiling water. This should be simmered for 15 minutes in a nonreactive (enamel or glass) pot, if you have one.

If your psoriasis worsens in winter and you're inclined to self-treat responsibly (consulting your doctor and medications, etc.), Oregon grape leaves can be infused in olive or sunflower oil plus vitamin E as a preservative. This salve can be gently heated if you want to melt some beeswax in it for thickening.

As we celebrate the holiday responsibly because of the pandemic, I'm giving thanks that the remedy for too much Thanksgiving grows just outside the window.

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