

Nature Notes

Oregon Grape



Oregon grape is a plant which is very common in the Nature Park and which offers something for each season. In spring the leaves are a glossy green with small spines on the margins and then bright yellow flowers appear. In summer a set of blue tinged berries is produced and in fall and winter the leaves remain on the plant but turn a reddish colour.

As happens all too often in the world of botany, different people have given the same plant different names. It is variously called “Oregon Grape”, “Barberry”, “Holly Grape”, “Mahonia” or by the scientific name *Berberis aquifolium*. The commercial plant industry tends to advertise and sell the same plant under the name *Mahonia aquifolium*. The end result is enough to confuse the rest of us.

Apparently the yellow pigment found in the inner bark of this plant was used as a dye by first nations peoples and the berries were used as a food source although they tend to be bitter and seedy. People have used the berries to make a jelly after they have been touched by frost and rendered less bitter, but some references say the berries contain plant alkaloids, which are toxic in large doses so caution is in order.

As with so many species of plant, Oregon grape is a potential source of medications. The alkaloid berberine has been touted both as an antibacterial medication and as an anti-inflammatory medication for skin diseases. Once again, caution is advised due to the potential toxicity of this chemical.

So, no matter what season you are in the Kimberley Nature Park you can enjoy the many faces of the Oregon grape.



Oregon Grape in spring



Oregon Grape in fall colours

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