

OREGON GRAPE HOLLY

Common Names: Oregon grape holly, mahonia

Botanical Name: *Mahonia*

Family: *Berberidaceae*

Lewis and Clark brought the Mahonia from the far west after their exploration for Thomas Jefferson. A Mr. Thomas Nuttall named the mahonia after the Irish political refugee Bernard M'Mahon, an early American gardener who wanted to instill the love of gardening throughout the United States. He did so by producing a catalog from his seed shop in Philadelphia that included one thousand species.

M'Mahon's wife took care of the shop and soon it became a meeting place for botanists. In 1806, he published, *The American Gardener's Calendar* that was one of the first gardening books in print at the time. It was so successful that it had 11 reprintings lasting for fifty years. The calendar was the standard American reference book on gardening.

President Thomas Jefferson had a copy and bought seeds from M'Mahon. The two men corresponded until M'Mahon's death in 1816. Seeds were ordered and sent and there were friendly comments as well. In April 1811, Jefferson told M'Mahon in a letter that, "I have an extensive flower border, in which I am fond of placing *handsome* plants or *fragrant*. Those of mere curiosity I do not aim at, having too many other cares to bestow more than a moderate attention to them."



During the 1800s there was a temptation for American gardeners to try to have their gardens look like those in England. Only recently have we begun to stop trying to mirror the Old World. The mahonia has fragrant flowers that look like yellow lily-of-the-valley. The shiny holly-like leaves turn beautiful colors in the fall and the blue-black fruit is edible. The berries can be made into jelly or wine. The mahonia is a barberry and strangely enough related to our woodland May apple. The Latinized Arabic word *berberis* may have come from the medical school of Salerno, where it was an important medicinal plant.

Mahonia is the American name whose namesake, M'Mahon is a tribute to a man who believed in American ideals and thought only of the "probable good I can render...to my fellow-men. I do not begrudge a share to such of the brute animals as can possibly be benefited thereby." This is the tribute of a man who had universal ideals but may not have felt this way after an American groundhog ate his garden.

100 Flowers and How They Got Their Names
by Diana Wells