Volume Seven:
Oregon Grape (*Mahonia* spp.)
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- **Common Name:** Oregon Grape
- **Latin Name:** *Mahonia aquifolium, Mahonia nervosa* (you may also see it under the genus *Berberis*)
- **Family:** Berberidaceae (Barberry family)
- **Parts Used:** roots
The 5 Keys of Oregon Grape

Tastes
The predominant taste of Oregon Grape root is bitter, plain and simple. This designates it as a relatively straightforward remedy with a specific focus on the digestive system and all of it’s secreting organs: stomach, small intestine, large intestine, pancreas, liver and gall bladder. Because of this primary influence on the exocrine glands it has systemic effects as well which will be discussed further. There is also a slight amount of astringency in the roots lending it a slightly tonic action, most specifically in the gastrointestinal tract.

Primary Actions

- **Bitter Tonic:** This remedy is likely one of our most reliable bitter tonics in the western materia medica. As mentioned above, it has a direct stimulant action upon the secretory glands of the digestive system, most notably the liver and gall bladder, but also the stomach, small and large intestines. In this way it is used to stimulate digestion, specifically in regards to the breakdown and absorption of fats and oils. It achieves this through its action on stimulating bile production in the liver and its secretion via the gall bladder.

- **Cholagogue/Choleretic:** These 2 actions often go alongside bitter tonics, but I thought I would mention them here for the sake of definitions. Choleretics are substances which increase the bile production of the hepatocytes in the liver, whereas cholagogues assist in the direct secretion of bile from the gall bladder into the small intestine. Essentially these terms are interchangeable, as choleretics are typically cholagogues and vice versa, and most medicinal agents that have a bitter taste are also cholagogue and choleretic.

- **Laxative:** Many texts will reference Oregon Grape root as a laxative remedy, though it is important to understand the context of this action. It is not a stimulating laxative like common herbs in commerce such as Senna or Cascara Sagrada. These remedies contain a particular class of constituents called “anthraquinone glycosides” which have a direct stimulant effect on the smooth muscles lining the large intestine. The 2 problems with these types of remedies is 1) you can form a dependence on them to stimulate colonic contractions and 2) they can cause spasms in the colon which can result in no small amount of discomfort. The beauty of a remedy like Oregon Grape, is that its laxative properties are due to it’s bitter tonic, cholagogue and choleretic properties. This means that rather than allopathically relieving a symptom like constipation, it is doing it in a more vitalist manner by increasing the digestive systems natural secretions (most notably bile) which are the bodies inherent laxative agents. Thus, if you understand the total net action of a bitter tonic, you see that the laxative nature is but a secondary result of a more core action on the physiology.

- **Alterative:** Due to its potent bitter tonic action, Oregon Grape is also considered a systemic alterative. It assists in regulating the metabolic functions of the body, both on the digestion and absorption side, as well as the detoxification side. Thus it is used to facilitate the overall detoxifying processes of the body whenever there are specific signs and symptoms that point towards metabolic depression and an accumulation of toxins in the form of waste products from slowed metabolism. The old doctors called this “bad blood
syndrome,” which typically manifested as digestive upset, lymphatic swelling, poor excretion, skin conditions, joint pain, chronic infections, low energy, fatigue, and brain fog, among others. This is one of the most important applications of Oregon Grape root, most notably for chronic skin conditions such as eczema, acne and psoriasis.

- **Antimicrobial:** Many texts will also list Oregon Grape as an “antimicrobial” herb to be used for infections. This is typically due to the research that has been on the popular alkaloid berberine, which gives the root its yellowish hue. While berberine certainly exhibits antimicrobial activity, it’s important to understand that Oregon Grape is not a natural antibiotic. This is a very allopathic way of understanding plants, and often results in misuse of the remedy and an overlooking of the totality of the herbs properties and energetics. We must keep our knowledge of plants within the context of their wholeness. Thus, while Oregon Grape does express direct antimicrobial activity, it is also a powerful metabolic alterative, meaning that it is shifting the ecological status of the body. We will discuss the energetics and such later, but an aspect of its antimicrobial property is also rooted in the ways it powerfully changes the internal ecology by relieving the internal environment that enables microbes to thrive and flourish. Oregon Grape (well berberine really) has been shown to also inhibit protozoa’s (Entamoeba, Giardia, Leishmania, Trichomonas), fungi (Candida), and various bacteria (Bacillus dysenteriae etc.).

- **Diuretic:** While not one of its primary uses and applications, the roots of Oregon Grape do display an influence upon the urinary apparatus as a diuretic. It is not considered a strong diuretic remedy, but all the research on berberine did show that its pharmacokinetics resulted in its excretion through the urinary tract. Thus all of the antimicrobial actions mentioned above apply to the urinary tract and has resulted in its application in the treatment of urinary tract infections with success.

- **Tonic/Astringent:** Upon tasting of the roots, one will notice that there is a mild astringency to them, lending tonic effects. We see this action as having a specific affinity for the mucosal membranes lining the digestive system, urinary tract, and respiratory system. Some books put under actions of this remedy the word “anticatarrhal” which again isn’t really an action per se, but rather a particular use of the plant (IE what it is good for)- in this case for an excess of catarrh, which is essentially stagnant mucous. This extends its applications to the respiratory system- though I would not necessarily consider it an expectorant. I have found it’s actions in the respiratory tract to be more of the upper parts of the system, most specifically the sinuses. Thus it would be used to tonify, dry up and move out stagnant mucous, or what we would consider the damp/stagnation tissue state.

**Affinities**

- **Physical Organs, Systems and Tissues:** These are the primary organs, systems and tissues Oregon Grape has an affinity for. I will briefly mention these affinities as they relate to the actions listed above. More detail will be gone into the specific effects this remedy has on these organs systems and tissues later on when we explore clinical patterns and uses.

  - **Digestive System:** This includes the stomach, small and large intestines. It increases all digestive secretions both of the primary GI, as well as secondary organs such as the
liver, gall bladder, and pancreas. This is due to its bitter tonic action, which leads to its laxative action.

• **Liver/Gall Bladder:** Here we see its use for both sides of the liver- it’s digestive dynamics as well as its detoxification virtues. The liver is truly the crux of where this remedy works and it’s uses to adjust the bodies metabolic functions. This affinity is associated with the bitter tonic, choleretic, and cholagogue actions.

• **Urinary Tract:** The alkaloid berberine has been shown to be excreted through the urinary tract, lending its antimicrobial action for the treatment of urinary tract infections.

• **Mucosal Membranes:** This is associated with its actions on the GI and the urinary tract, which also extends to the upper respiratory tract and the treatment of excess mucous/catarrh that has become stagnant and stuck. The impact on the mucosal membranes is due to its bitter tonic action.

• **Skin:** This is one of our top remedies for the skin, treating it from the inside out. It does have some topical applications as a wash for skin infections and wounds, but it is most commonly used internally for the treatment of chronic skin conditions and is considered one of the best. This affinity is a secondary effect of its alterative action.

• **Blood:** Oregon Grape is considered both a blood cleanser as well as a blood builder, likely due to its influence on the hepatic structure. Thus it is commonly used for the clinical pattern of “bad blood” to be discussed later. It is attributed to its alterative action.

• **Lymphatics:** As an alterative Oregon Grape is commonly used to assist in relieving lymphatic stagnation and swellings, chronic infections, and the overall need to detoxify the system. Also associated with its alterative action.

**Energetics**

• **Temperature, Moisture and Tone:** Because Oregon Grape is a pure bitter plant with no aromatic qualities, its effects upon temperature is cooling. This is pretty much across the board for any true bitter plants that do not have any volatile/essential oils in them which can warm them up a bit (David Winston calls these “fragrant bitters”). Typically, the stronger the bitter the more cooling it is, and I would classify Oregon Grape as a moderate to strong bitter, meaning that it is strong on the cooling side. It is definitely contraindicated for constitutions that already tend towards coldness.

It’s influence on moisture is a little bit more complex. On the one side, we see that like most strong bitter tonics, it is increasing the secretion of fluids that are ultimately leaving the body-meaning that it will have a longer term drying effect on the constitution. We note this in its use for chronic catarrh, or congestion of the mucosal membranes in the GI, urinary tract, or respiratory system. Yet, we see in classical literature that it was commonly used for specifically dry skin conditions like eczema, and has been used for dried up mucosal membranes which
leads to accumulation of waste products. “[Oregon Grape specific indications:] Poor anabolism, with withering, wasting, dry skin, scalp, or mucosa, constipation from lack of secretion; at the same time a buildup of catabolic waste products with lack of secretion from skin and mucosa.” (Matthew Wood)

This is an interesting paradox about this remedy. Dry and damp are a polarity… it’s tough to imagine a remedy working on opposite ends of the spectrum. Yet Wood mentions it being used for the dry/atrophy and damp/stagnation tissue states. Finley Ellingwood says, “It seems of especial value in scaly skin diseases and in orders of a non-inflammatory type, and yet it works nicely in some cases of the moist variety… In moist eczema it has acted most satisfactorily, but has usually been given in conjunction with other treatment. Dr. Soper, in 1884, reported in the Therapeutic Gazette a most intractable case of moist eczema of an acute character covering the entire body. No other alterative was given. The case was cured in four weeks.”

So where does that leave us? I think what we have here is a difference of action in regards to the various affinities of the plant. We always need to look at the global action of the plant and how it is affecting the physiology of the person. If there is constipation due to dryness in the GI, and the remedy increases digestive secretions, it is going to acutely moisten that local tissue. Yet those fluids will ultimately (for the most part) leave the body and in the long run increase dryness.

If we think of a chronic skin condition, it is possible that the blood itself (meaning also the extracellular fluid) is impure and laden with toxins, preventing fresh oxygen and nutrients from reaching the surface. Possibly through cleansing the blood, lymph, and extracellular fluids, the remedy is allowing fresh oxygen and nutrient rich blood to reach the surface and allow moisture to be restored to the skin.

In regards to the catarrhal conditions, if there is an excess of dryness within the membrane and the result of such dryness is that the mucous that is present is unable to move, there is a sort of mixture of dry and damp/stagnation. The bitter tonic action will get the membranes to secrete again, liquefy the mucous, and move things out. Again though, if these fluids are leaving the body there will be a net constitutional drying effect.

So this paradox of dry and moist action of Oregon Grape is a question of the local effect and constitutional/long term effect of the plant. The short term/local effect will be moistening, as it is increasing secretions through its bitter tonic action, yet because these fluids ultimately leave the body it will have a longer term drying effect. I have noticed this myself personally as well as in my clients.

As far as its influence upon tissue tone, Oregon Grape will have a slightly tonic effect on the tissues due to its slight astringency. This is important to consider, especially in regards to its influence on the mucous membranes. If there is an excess of dryness in the mucous membranes with no mucous present, then it should not be used. This is likely one of the biggest errors in the usage of Oregon Grape along with its berberine containing cousins Goldthread (Coptis trifolia), Barberry (Berberis vulgaris), and especially Goldenseal (Hydrastis...
canadensis). It is the “antibiotic” perspective of these herbs that often leads to their misuse and the resulting imbalances they can generate, which is typically over tonification (tightening) of the mucous membranes.

- **Effects upon Doshas:** From the perspective of Ayurveda, we see that Oregon Grape root is especially beneficial for treating the kapha dosha, with its excess of damp accumulation, depressed metabolism, and tendency towards accumulation of waste products. Typically the kapha dosha responds nicely to alterative therapy, making Oregon Grape an ideal remedy. Though we have to exercise caution with its cooling properties as kapha is already cold. This can simply be remedies by formulating it with warming circulatory stimulants or carminatives.

The cooling nature though is particularly beneficial for the treatment of pitta, and as they also tend to be moist the drying effects can also be beneficial. As for vata, we need to exercise some caution here due again to the cooling energetics, as well as the long term drying properties. Though as mentioned above, it has classically been used for dry scaly skin conditions which would be more common in a vata constitution. Like using it for kaphas, compounding Oregon Grape with warming remedies like Sarsaparilla (Smilax spp.), Ginger (Zingiber officinale), Fennel (Foeniculum vulgare), Cayenne (Capsicum annuum), Prickly Ash (Zanthoxylum clava-herculitis), or Rosemary (Rosmarinus officinalis) would prove beneficial to modulate its coldness.

- **Effects upon Tissue States:** According to Matthew Wood in his Earthwise Herbal, Oregon Grape is specifically indicated for both the dry/atrophy and the damp/stagnation tissue states. As mentioned previously, this seeming paradox could be seen from differentiation of the short term local effects and the longer term constitutional effects.

The alterative properties of Oregon Grape make it quite beneficial for the clearing of accumulated metabolic waste products, damp accumulation in the digestive system, urinary tract, liver, blood and lymphatics. Remember that this tissue state is also referred to as “torpor,” meaning that it creates a condition in the body that is much more prone to infection. I always like to think of damp/stagnation as being similar to a stagnant swampy bog, filled with flies, mosquitos, and thick sludgy water you wouldn’t ever think of drinking. Put that in the body and you have the damp/stagnation tissue state. Thus it is much more prone to bacterial, fungal, and other microbial invasion.

Damp/stagnation is synonymous to what the old doctors called “bad blood syndrome,” a constellation of symptoms that points to a depression of metabolic processing. This includes the digestion, absorption, distribution and detoxification of nutrients and waste products. On catabolic (breakdown) side of this equation, when we don’t metabolize what we put into our body effectively, the waste products tend to accumulate and stagnate within the extracellular fluids, blood, lymphatics, and liver. As these systems build up they often push themselves out through the skin, leading to chronic skin conditions. The body often launches an immunologically based inflammatory process to try and move things along and “cook out” the toxins, oftentimes reading them as foreign objects. This often leads to a systemic inflammatory response and can lead to joint pain, fatigue, stiffness, and skin conditions among other issues.
This dampness combined with inflammation would be what the Chinese referred to as “damp/heat,” and it is primarily treated with alteratives such as Oregon Grape. Thus the bitter tonic properties helps to relieve stagnation in the liver, clean out the bloodstream, stimulate digestion and absorption, and activate the body’s innate detoxification processes - thus it works on both sides of the metabolic pathway.

On the other hand it has been used to treat the dry/atrophy tissue state. Atrophy is essentially tissue weakness and wasting, most commonly due to a lack of nutrients and oxygenation. If we think of the Water Element as being the universal medium of the body, most if not all things that directly nourish the cells are carried through water. Whenever there is a lack of water in the system, or if those waters are stagnant and not flowing properly, the tissues themselves begin to starve and thus waste away.

Here we can see this paradoxical combination of damp/stagnation and dry/atrophy. If the channels themselves are clogged with damp accumulation, then the cells and tissues are not being optimally nourished and become weak and atrophic, which can express as dryness. Doing something like demulcents will not remedy the dryness in this situation, as it is a sort of “dry from damp.” As Oregon Grape moves through the system and relieves the stagnation of fluids, they start flowing more smoothly and are able to reach the tissue sites to optimally nourish them again. It also acts on the atrophic tissue state by getting the mucosal membranes to start secreting again when they have become non-responsive.
Prabhava/Specific Indications

• Pulse and Tongue Indications: In the pulse and tongue we want to primarily look for indications of dampness and stagnation within the system. This is often easy to find on the tongue as there is typically a thick coating on the tongue with an adequate amount of moisture. It will sometimes also appear to be swollen or puffy, and ridges or scallops along the edge indicates dampness within the system with malabsorption. The coating is typically white and thick if there is an excess of coldness (consider combining it with warming herbs here). A yellow coating indicates there is heat present and this would be a good place for Oregon Grape. The stomach position in the middle of the tongue, as well as the intestinal tract positions towards the back of the tongue will typically be coated when this remedy is applicable. The pulse will typically feel obscured, slow, sluggish, languid, and “filmy” indicating a presence of toxins in the bloodstream.

• Psychological Picture: Oregon Grape is one of those remedies that I have personally spent a good amount of time with both clinically as well as in the lab and the wild, preparing medicine, harvesting, and sitting with it. In all of that time I have found there is a unique psychological quality that arises through depth work with this plant that is predominantly oriented around the functioning of the solar plexus, what in the east is referred to as the manipura chakra. This is expressed very clearly in the coloration signatures of the yellow flowers and roots, the same color as manipura, as well as the bitter tonic action which acts upon the solar plexus (stomach, liver, gall bladder).

This is a type of plant that I often refer to as a “power plant,” meaning that it is one of those remedies that assists one in becoming stronger in embodying their true self. I have found it particularly useful for people that tend to give their power away, are timid, submissive, and can even get into a state of fear of others- what they think about you, what they want from you, etc. There’s a certain intensity about the morphology of Oregon Grape, with its prickly leaves and scorpion-like appearance, it is who it is and isn’t afraid to express that. I’ve found Oregon Grape people sometimes have a certain degree of passivity, awkwardness, and social anxiety not because of nervousness, but because they simply don’t feel strong in who they are. In that way they can often think other people don’t like them, accept them, or are somehow unkind to them behind their back. These are the ways I think of this remedy as a “power plant,” helping one to step into their personal power, claim who they are, and express it out in the world without fear of what others might think, do or say. I’ve found it to be a great remedy for young chronic Cannabis smokers who have dried out mucous membranes, brain fog, feel timid in themselves, and are on the socially awkward side of things.

These were simply things that I had realized as I sat with the plant, worked with it in depth, and had administered it to others. One day I realized that it was in a Flower Essence Repertory that I had on hand and decided to check out what the authors had to say about it. It was pretty interesting how much what they said matched my own personal experience. “Oregon Grape is indicated for those persons who are filled with paranoia; they see the world and those around them as hostile and unfair…. Oregon Grape is widely applicable, but is especially indicated for the tension and ill-will which predominates in many urban environments. Through Oregon Grape the soul learns to break the basic pattern of mistrust.
It realizes that it can look instead for the positive intentions of others, and create situations which generate good will and loving inclusion.” (Patricia Kaminsky and Richard Katz)

This totally was confirmed by the experience of a student of mine. She said that one day she was out in the Cascade Mountains of Washington in the autumn harvesting Oregon Grape roots. At one point during the harvest a helicopter flew overhead and she immediately felt a ripple of fear shoot down her spine. "What if it's the forest service? What if they saw me? Oh my God am I going to go to jail for harvesting plants?!" Her mind started to race to literally every worse case scenario possible and couldn’t get out of the loop paranoia. She suddenly felt weak and powerless in the face of the powers at be. She packed up her loppers and bailed on her harvest. After she had hiked for 30 minutes or so, and drove for another hour and didn’t see or hear another soul, she wished she stayed in the woods to finish her harvest!

I thought this story matched the paranoia piece quite nicely. It also illustrates the premise of plant communication, and how whenever you take the time to sit, pray, make offerings and connect with the intelligence of a plant, it will oftentimes use your experiences to communicate with you. Some refer to this as entering the “dreamtime of the plant,” where everything happening internal and external is somehow reflecting the nature of the medicine you are working with. Now this can sometimes lead to confusion and mistaking your own thoughts for the communication of the plant, so some definite differentiation is necessary for sure.

I find it interesting that I had found Oregon Grape to be useful for young chronic Cannabis smokers that felt a little spacey and timid in themselves and that it is a remedy for paranoia and the “expectation of hostility from others” (Kaminski & Katz). Many times I have found that especially young men that smoke Cannabis chronically from a young age have a certain degree of suppressed anger and hostility that they don’t want to express. Cannabis is nice in that regard because it places a blanket over it so you feel mellow, light, happy, and easygoing… not angry basically. Take the Cannabis away and there tends to be a strong emotional purging that occurs, with strong flares of anger, irritability and frustration. “Unfortunately, the soul who is gripped by this paranoid state creates the very reality he/she projects, for those who are treated in a hostile or mistrustful manner usually respond with an equal measure in return.” (Kaminski and Katz) Perhaps there is a link between the anger, mistrust, lack of personal power, paranoia, and Cannabis smoking that Oregon Grape works on….

Clinical Patterns and Uses

1. Digestive Insufficiency and Infection: Here we see the bitter tonic effects of Oregon Grape shine as a stimulate for the entire digestive apparatus. As with all bitter tonics, this remedy has a direct influence upon the secreting tissues of the stomach, small intestine, and large intestine. This helps to prepare the digestive system to receive food, enhancing the digestion and assimilation of nutrients. We would typically think to use a remedy like this for general gastrointestinal tract symptoms such as gas, bloating, constipation, sluggish digestion, undigested food in the stool, lack of appetite etc.
There are a few cautions to be aware of in using Oregon Grape as a digestive remedy though. The first and likely most important to remember is that as a relatively strong bitter, it has a strong cooling effect and should never be used in individuals with cold digestion or a cold constitution- overuse can lead to cold damage of the digestive system.

How do you tell if someone has a cold digestion? First off, these people will typically feel cold all over. According to traditional systems of medicine, the solar plexus contains the central fire of the body which is responsible not only for digestion and assimilation in the GI, but for digestion and assimilation at the cellular level throughout the whole body, as well as the radiation of heat throughout the organism. If this central fire is depressed, called agni in Ayurveda, or the “fountain of life” of Samuel Thomson, this radiant heat will not distribute itself throughout the organism and will lead to signs of cold. This typically looks like pale cold skin (from a lack of circulation to the surface), cold hands and feet (from circulation not reaching the periphery), lack of energy/vitality, fatigue, brain fog, and slow sluggish digestion.

In this type of situation, using a cold bitter plant like Oregon Grape could exacerbate the situation and further dampen the digestive and metabolic fire. More often than not, someone in this situation will simply not like the herb, saying it doesn’t make them feel good. Here we want to reach for our other class of digestive remedies called carminatives, which also stimulate digestion but tend to have a warming energetic quality. Examples include Fennel (Foeniculum vulgare), Ginger (Zingiber officinale), and Angelica (Angelica archangelica). Interestingly enough, many warming carminative remedies also help to stimulate circulation of blood as well, thus distributing the vital heat throughout the body more effectively.

It’s quite common in the world of herbal medicine for people to be taught “bitters are for digestion,” and they often leave it at that. Thus there is a common misconception that everyone should be taking bitters before meals, especially if they have digestive symptoms. Unfortunately most people overlook these tissue state and constitutional factors and can actually do more harm than good from administering bitters.

Does this mean you can’t give a bitter to cold client? On their own, yes. But there are ways we can still administer bitter remedies to the cold patient- which is where the art of herbal formulation comes in. Many classic and contemporary herbal formulas for the digestive system will contain a blend of cooling bitter remedies as well as warming carminative remedies to give more balance to the formula. In the case of the cold client, we obviously want there to be a greater predominance of the warming carminatives than the cold bitters. There are some examples of this later on in the formulation section of this monograph.

The second caution in using strong bitters like Oregon Grape is in cases of GERD, acid reflux, ulceration, or hyperacidity of the stomach. Because bitter plants are increasing the secretions of the stomach, most often in the form of hydrochloric acid, there is a strong possibility of irritation and aggravation of these symptoms. If you think of it, there is either an excess of acidic secretions in the stomach which is then rising up and burning the
esophagus- increasing these secretions would certainly increase the discomfort here for sure. If someone has an ulcer in the stomach, washing that open wound with hydrochloric acid would be quite painful indeed.

It could be tempting to use a bitter- after all the burning sensations associated with these symptoms are an excess of heat and one would assume giving a cooling bitter would be great right? Unfortunately they are not because they are far too stimulating. These types of conditions are actually best treated with soothing cooling demulcent remedies like Marshmallow (Althea officinalis), Slippery Elm (Ulmus rubra), Licorice (Glycyrrhiza glabra), or Plantain (Plantago major), as well as wound healing tonic astringent plants like Plantain (Plantago major), Calendula (Calendula officinalis), Willow bark (Salix alba), Lady’s Mantle (Alchemilla vulgaris), or Goldenseal (Hydrastis canadensis). Now Willow, Calendula and Goldenseal are all also relatively bitter plants as well, so we want to exercise caution with our dosing and monitor the person to make sure their symptoms are not aggravated.

To quote the Eclectic Finley Ellingwood “It’s influence upon the secretion of the entire glandular structure of the digestive and intestinal tract is steady, sure, and permanent, although not always as immediately marked as some other agents. It stimulates all the glandular organs of the body. It stimulates digestion and absorption, and thus improves general nutrition. It materially stimulates waste and repair.”

The other application of Oregon Grape for the digestive system is associated with its antimicrobial properties. This is likely one of our greatest allies for the treatment of a wide variety of digestive tract infection from amoebas, parasites, bacteria and other various microbes. The berberine and other alkaloids have demonstrated a nice broad spectrum antiseptic action for the gut.

For these purposes, we are really wanting to have a direct topical action on the gastric tissues themselves. This means that giving 10 drops of a tincture is usually not the most ideal method of administration, as most tinctures are absorbed through the mucous membranes lining the mouth and stomach. Here we want to give strong decoctions of Oregon Grape root, so that they bypass absorption in the stomach and enter the actual small and large intestines, coat the walls, and have a direct antiseptic property on whatever little critters are in there.

Michael Moore states “Remember too that, like Barberry, Oregon Grape substantially inhibits many gram-negative rod and cocci bacteria, such a E. coli and Aerobacter; Klebœella, Proteus, Pseudomonas, Shigella, and Vibrio species, as well as many gram-positive bacteria such as staph and strep. Topically and internally it also works on Candida albicans infections and helps slow down amoebic dysentery- more useful in low-level infections than major ones.”

It’s important to consider the humoral or energetic properties here as well though, as we don’t want to only take the allopathic “natural antibiotic” approach to understanding our medicines. While Oregon Grape does have a direct antiseptic property, we must remember that it is also changing the ecological status of the digestive system, most notably through
cleansing dampness and stagnation. As mentioned above, this tissue state is also called “torpor” and is commonly attributed to various types of infections. It’s a two way street—whenever there is damp/stagnation the body is much more susceptible to microbial infection, and also many pathogenic microbes tend to generate a damp stagnant environment wherever they are present. Thus, they create the environment that they prefer.

So Oregon Grape is not just “killing the bugs” so to speak, but it is also directly transforming the environment in which they dwell, draining dampness and moving stagnation so that the actual ecological state of the organs and tissues is inhospitable to these most unpleasant invaders of the system. It is this combination of the biochemical and energetic influence of Oregon Grape upon the digestive system that makes it so powerful for these types of symptoms.

If someone is particularly cold in their constitution but had intestinal disbiosis, I like to simply infuse some Cloves (Syzygium aromaticum) to the Oregon Grape decoction. Basically you want to decoct the Oregon Grape roots for about an hour or so, take it off the heat, and then add the Cloves and put a lid on it and infuse for about 20-30 minutes. Ginger is also a nice addition. These herbs warm it up quite nicely and make it more applicable to cold constitutions— they also improve the flavor.

I have used Oregon Grape very successfully for these types of symptoms. I remember a number of years ago I came back from traveling in South America for a few months and picked up some nasty GI bugs while I was down there. Everything was totally thrown off in my digestive system. After only one or two weeks of drinking strong Oregon Grape decoctions it completely reset my digestive system and I was good to go from there. It is quite effective indeed.

According to Matthew Wood, Mahonia is specifically indicated for “Incipient or chronic indigestion, loss of appetite, wasting, constipation. Catarrh of the mucosa of the gastrointestinal canal. Constipation, dry intestine. Ulceration of the intestines, Crohn’s disease. Car sickness, nausea.”

2. Liver Stagnation: Aside from its actions upon the primary digestive organs (stomach, small intestine, large intestine), Oregon Grape also influences the secondary digestive organs—the liver, gall bladder, and pancreas. These are referred to as “secondary” organs because they are not a direct part of the gastrointestinal tract, but are definitely critical elements of digestion. This is because they create specific substances which are secreted directly into the GI that assist with the breakdown of fats, starches, proteins, and other nutrients in our food. Sometimes imbalances in the digestive system are due to an imbalance in one of these secondary digestive organs.

The liver and gall bladder are highly important in this regard. Their roles in digestion are for the manufacturing of bile (in the liver) and its storage and release into the duodenum (in the gall bladder via the bile ducts). This can be considered the hepatobiliary system. Bile is responsible for the breakdown and digestion of fats and oils— it works as an
emulsifier, breaking up fatty compounds into smaller more assimilable “droplets.” Whenever there is a deficiency either in the production of bile in the liver, or its secretion in the gall bladder, someone will often have a hard time digesting fatty or oily foods. This isn’t just fried chicken or something, but could be oily salad dressings, avocados, fatty meats, etc. You can usually tell if someone has a lack of bile by the presence of pale stool (bile is what gives the stool its yellowish-brown color) or oily slicks on the surface of the toilet water. The latter shows fats are not being absorbed and are passing all the way through the alimentary canal and being eliminated.

Our cholagogue and choleretic remedies are this which act on the hepatobiliary system, helping to increasing bile secretions by the gall bladder and its production in the liver respectively. They are directly stimulating the liver and gall bladder into a greater level of activity. It’s also important to consider that when I am referring to the gall bladder I am also referring to the entire biliary system, which includes the bile ducts which transport watery bile from the liver into the gall bladder where it is concentrated, and the ducts that transport it from the gall bladder to the duodenum (upper portion of the small intestine). Problems in bile secretions can occur either in these organs or in the tubules which transport this all important substance.

Oregon Grape root comes along here and assists the liver in producing a greater quantity of bile and signals the gall bladder to release. This is triggered via the bitter taste receptors on the tongue, which send a signal to the brain and then to the gall bladder to release bile, effectively prepping the GI to receive food. This stimulating action also helps to clear any damp accumulation or stagnation within the gall ducts, “sweeping them clean” so to speak and making the pathways clear for bile to get to where it needs to go. It is also a decongestant for the portal circulation, the primary vein which brings food from the GI to the liver for further metabolism. The portal circulation can sometimes get stagnant and backed up, which is an aspect of liver stagnation.

I tend to think of the liver as a central hub with 2 different directions of action. The first is from the liver to the gall bladder to the GI (liver sending), and from the GI to the portal vein to the liver (liver receiving), which is its digestive direction. The second is its metabolic functions, where it is sending nutrients out to the rest of the body and receiving metabolic waste products that need to be broken down and detoxified. Thus the liver is actually a critical aspect of our cells’ ability to adequately receive nutrition, as well as being the crux of the body’s detoxification processes. When the liver gets stagnant, we see both aspects of this process affected.

One the one hand it is less able to process metabolites and breakdown products, thus it gets congested with toxins, and on the other, because it is congested, it is less able to process and distribute nutrients. When the liver gets backed up in this way, it tends to then back up into blood, the lymph, the spleen and ultimately the skin, as the body is attempting to throw off toxins via any route of elimination it can. This leads to the entire bad blood syndrome mentioned previously, with symptoms such as chronic skin conditions, inflammatory problems, chronic infections, joint pain, headaches, fatigue,
digestive insufficiency, portal stagnation, gout, gall or kidney stones, etc. It tends to manifest humorally as the damp/heat pattern.

This is where Oregon Grape comes to the rescue! As mentioned above, it works on the digestive side of the liver through increasing bile production as well as decongesting the portal circulation. But, it is also working on the larger systemic side of the liver, assisting in cleansing it of stagnation and dampness, cleaning out the bloodstream, the lymphatics, the spleen, and ultimately the skin (but this is really through it’s deeper cleansing properties). By removing these metabolic waste products and helping the liver to do its job more efficiently and effectively, the body is better able to process its nutrients and deliver them to the tissues, as there is no longer a major “traffic jam” happening throughout the system. This is all ultimately the pattern behind the damp/stagnation tissue state, ama accumulation or excess of kapha (according to Ayurveda), an excess of canker (from Thomsonianism), or overall toxicity and congestion within the bodies tissues and channels.

This is all essentially describing the alterative properties of Oregon Grape, and it is one of the best remedies to consider for a broad spectrum alterative formula. I often like combining it with other alteratives with strong affinities for other organ systems, like the lymphatics, blood, and kidneys. Even though Oregon Grape works on those systems as well, it’s primary affinities of focus are the liver and GI. It can also be used for all manner of liver formulas, whether trophorestorative or detoxifying.

3. **Chronic Skin Conditions:** Everything mentioned in the second half of the above section relates to the traditional usage of Oregon Grape for chronic skin conditions, such as eczema, psoriasis, boils, pruritis, ulcerations, syphilis, and acne. David Hoffman notes “As skin problems of this nature generally have systemic causes, the tonic activity or Oregon Grape on the liver and gallbladder may explain its effectiveness.”

As Hoffman mentions, chronic skin conditions are not really an issue with the skin- it is merely an outward symptom manifesting due to a deeper problem within the system itself. We must remember that the skin is the largest organ of detoxification, and chronic conditions of the skin are typically because the other deeper organs of detoxification are not functioning properly, typically the liver, digestive system, and kidneys. The way I tend to think of it, is that when the liver gets backed up all the way, it “spills over” into the bloodstream and extracellular fluids, which when full congests the lymphatics which are trying to clean it out, which then ultimately seeps out into the skin.

Thus our approach to treating chronic skin conditions of this nature is to not just put a salve on it (a very allopathic approach) but to treat it from the inside out by addressing the deeper organs of elimination. This is essentially the root of alterative therapy.

Oregon Grape works on a broad spectrum of this entire process of detoxification. First it helps to clear dampness and stimulate the digestive system (for if the contents of the colon and small intestine are not moving along it will ultimately put a greater stress on the liver). Then it helps to decongest the liver, gallbladder, and portal circulation. Moving out from
there it helps to clean the blood and lymphatics, as well as the kidneys and urinary tract to an extent. This is what ultimately benefits the skin.

Traditionally, Oregon Grape is considered a specific for “dry, scaly, itching patches; facial eruptions; psoriasis, eczema, dandruff, acne. Waxy, yellow, dry, parchment-like appearance of the skin, similar to what is sometimes seen in the beginning of jaundice or diseases of the spleen, where there is poor assimilation and wasting of flesh. Inability to sweat, especially when active or feverish. Eruptions on the face, at puberty.” (Matthew Wood)

Finley Ellingwood states, “The specific action of this agent is in scaly, pustular and other skin diseases due to the disorder condition of the blood. It is the most reliable alterative when the influence of the dyscrasia is apparent in the skin. It is given freely during treatment of skin diseases where an alterative is considered an essential part of the treatment… It contributes to the removal of pimples and roughness and promotes a clear complexion, a soft, smooth and naturally moist skin in sensitive young ladies, when the cause is not a reflex one from ovarian or uterine irritation, or menstrual irregularity. It seems of especial value in scaly skin diseases and in orders of a non-inflammatory type, and yet it works nicely in some cases of the moist variety.”

While it is a specific for these conditions and can be used as a simple, most herbalists prefer to use it in formula with other alteratives with strong affinities for the blood, lymphatics, and kidneys, such as Nettle leaf (*Urtica dioica*), Cleavers (*Galium aparine*), Calendula (*Calendula officinalis*), Sarsaparilla (*Smilax spp.*), Burdock (*Arctium lappa*), Figwort (*Scrophularia nodosa*), etc.
4. **Mucous Membrane Tonic:** Here we see another aspect of the bitter tonic properties acting not on the gastric mucosa, but the mucosal membranes as a whole. This includes that of the urinary tract (see next clinical use) and the respiratory system. It’s actions on the respiratory system is often an overlooked aspect of this remedy, but we must remember that it is a direct tonic for the mucosal membranes—this is associated with not only the bitter taste but also the slight astringency of the root.

It’s important to clarify this, because Oregon Grape is not an expectorant to be used in respiratory tract infections like bronchitis. Rather, it tends to have a stronger affinity for the upper respiratory system especially the sinuses, nose and throat, where there is what the old doctors would call an excess of catarrh. Catarrhal diseases are those which afflict the upper respiratory tract and are distinguished by an excess of mucous buildup within the tissues, lack of discharge, and an overall leakiness of the membranes. Through stimulating the mucosal secretions and tonifying the membrane, Oregon Grape assists in cleansing the sinuses, nose and throat of the excess mucous by producing a nice fresh layer of mucous which thins the old stuff out and allows it to move easier. It then astringes and tonifies the membrane so that it comes back to its proper state of tone.

Matthew Wood mentions it being specific for, “Allergies. Chronic catarrhal conditions of the upper respiratory tract, nose and throat; thick, gummy, tenacious mucus; with wasting; with soreness in the muscles, cartilage, bones.”

This is an important point with this plant and why it shouldn’t really be used for a prolonged period of time, especially as a “natural antibiotic.” Oftentimes people will take this remedy (and Goldenseal) with Echinacea to “boost the immune system,” and will take it very frequently in too high of a dose which can lead to over tonification of the mucous membranes and thus an excess of dryness.

5. **Urinary Tract Infection:** This is another usage of Oregon Grape that is often times overlooked, but an important property. I learned this use from Paul Bergner. His research revealed that the berberine alkaloids present in Oregon Grape root is directly excreted in the urine, thus instilling its antiseptic virtues not only in the GI but also in the urinary tract. It is not a notable diuretic remedy, but delivering this antiseptic constituent through the urinary tract will give us a direct topical antiseptic action for the treatment of urinary tract infections.

As a mucous membrane tonic, it will also be useful for atonic, mucous rich, damp/stagnant conditions in the urinary tract. This will typically be noticeable by a heavy, dragging sensation in the bladder, and mucous in the urine. This shows that the mucous membranes are in need of tonification and that the tissue state is damp with stagnation. Again, it is not only killing the bacteria, but also shifting the ecology of the organ system to make it inhospitable to the pathogenic lifeforms.

I do not tend to use it as a simple for UTI’s, but rather in formulation with other herbs that have direct antiseptic properties for the urinary tract along with remedies with a more distinct diuretic property to enhance the flushing effects (see formula later). Generally
speaking, infusions and decoctions are ideal methods of administration for delivering herbs to the urinary tract because all of the water you are drinking in the tea has a diuretic property of its own. If tinctures are to be used, I suggest putting them in a glass of water.

6. **Topical Applications:** Another overlooked usage of Oregon Grape is for topical applications. More often than not, people immediately think “salve” when they hear of topical use of herbs, but it’s important to remember that there are other ways of using herbs topically than just a salve. The berberine alkaloids which are the primary constituent associated with the antiseptic properties are actually not well extracted in oils contrary to popular belief. They are predominantly water soluble. Thus, Oregon Grape is best used topically as a wash, soak, or fomentation. The latter is basically soaking a clean cloth in the decoction and wrapping it around the afflicted part. It is a great remedy to consider for really bad infected wounds, ulcerations, boils, deep wounds, pesky staph infections, and other nasty skin infections. This is really where I think of using Oregon Grape topically, for those hard to treat skin infections.

Michael Moore notes that “new research has shown that both Barberry and Oregon Grape diminish the drug resistance of many newer strains of *Staphylococcus aureus.*” This is great news, because drug resistant staph is classically quite difficult to treat, so tuck this little Oregon Grape topical usage trick up your sleeve- hopefully you never need to use it, but if you do you’ll be glad you did (and your client will be even more!).

**Pharmacological Data**

- **Primary Constituents:** Isoquinoline alkaloids (berberine, jatrorrhizine, palmatine, berbamine), tannins
- **Mechanisms of Action:** The primary mechanism of action of Oregon Grape is based on the presence of the bitter isoquinoline alkaloids. It is these bitter compounds which are responsible for the bitter tonic, chologogue, choleretic, and alterative properties, as well as the antimicrobial effects. The tannins are responsible for the astringency of Oregon Grape.

**Contraindications and Safety**

- **Contraindications:** It is contraindicated in pregnancy because many of the isoquinoline alkaloids have uterine stimulant properties. Many authors also advice its avoidance during lactation as well.
- **Energetic/constitutional side effects:** As mentioned above, the predominant energetic effect of Oregon Grape root is that it is cooling, thus caution should be exercised in administering to individuals with a cold constitution. As long term effects can be drying, this should be taken into consideration as well.
- **Herb-Drug Interactions:** According to Michael Moore, the alkaloids present in Oregon Grape have an affinity for the Cytochrome P450 detoxification pathway of the liver, a similar pathway acted upon by St. John’s Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*). Some may activate or block the various substrates of this all important liver detoxification mechanism, which detoxifies a lot of prescription drugs. If you mess with this pathway, you mess with how drugs are
metabolized, which means you can either cause them to be broken down more efficiently and effectively (which in my opinion may not be a bad thing - but it could also potentially make them less physiologically active) or it could cause them to not be broken down and metabolized as effectively and lead to an increased effect. In short, it might be best to not combine Oregon Grape with prescription drugs until more research is done on this subject.

**Preparations and Dosage**

Oregon Grape is one of those herbs that can really be administered any way you can get it into the body, from decoctions, powders, tinctures, washes etc.

- **Tincture:** The tincture of Oregon Grape is a wonderful way to administer the plant because many have a hard time with drinking the decoction due to its bitter flavor. It works very
nicely in this regard for its alterative and bitter tonic properties. I personally prefer to work with the fresh roots as opposed to dried roots, but then again I tend to really like using fresh plants for tinctures over dried herbs any day. I typically do a moderate percentage of alcohol for the fresh tincture- around 60%- as there isn’t a whole lot of water in those roots. 50% alcohol is good for the dried roots. I always make my tinctures as strong as I possibly can, with Oregon Grape a 1:2 ratio is usually attainable if you grind them up small enough- a Vita-Mix works pretty well for this, just make sure there aren’t any little pebbles or rocks in there!!

As for dosage, I like the advice of Dr. John Scudder (an Eclectic physician): “When effective, we like the small dose; when necessary we give the large one with equal delight.” Matthew Wood dosage is 1-3 drops, but many practitioners use it in amounts of 30 drops. In Britain the recommended dosage is 1-4 mL of a 1:5 up to three times a day. I just want to say that 4 mL of Oregon Grape 3x a day is a pretty hefty dose!! That means you would go through a 1 oz tincture bottle in about 2.5 days! This high dosage would only be for short periods of time and when it is absolutely necessary. Otherwise more moderate dosing is sufficient. I tend to like it between 10-20 drops.

• Decoction: A good strong decoction of Oregon Grape is sure to knock out a wide variety of intestinal infections with parasites, fungi, yeasts, bacteria, or other pathogenic microbes. This is the ideal method of preparation and administration for this application, as you are getting a direct topical application along the lining of the digestive system when you drink a tea. Most tinctures are absorbed in the mucous membranes of the mouth and stomach and don’t actually reach the intestinal tract. Of course that’s okay for a remedy like Oregon Grape, as the bitter taste is leading to the reflex action of most of what the herb is doing. But intestinal bugs should get direct contact with the berberine for the “anti” effect.

To make a good decoction of Oregon Grape, I like to put about 1/4-1/2 cup of cut roots in 3-4 cups of water, and simmer it gently for an hour. This usually results in 2-3 cups of finished decoction. Watch out, this one’s bitter!!

The decoction of Oregon Grape is also a super useful preparation to keep in mind for topical applications. It’s been shown that salves are actually not the most ideal method of preparation for treating open wounds. This is because the beeswax that usually goes into the salve creates an anaerobic environment that favors the growth of pathogenic microbes. Now I will say that minor cuts and scrapes and the like are probably fine to treat with salves (I’ve used them in that way for a long time and never had a problem), but when we are talking about staph infections, large gaping wounds, punctures and such, salves are really not indicated.

This is where a good herbal wash, soak, or fomentation comes in handy. Oregon Grape can be used in this way for a wide variety of first aid applications, especially when there is potential for infection, or its already there. Clean cloth can be soaked in a decoction and wrapped around the afflicted area to provide its antimicrobial actions as well as begin to gently astringe the wound.
Powder: I really like the powder of Oregon Grape because of its wide variety of applications. It is quite useful for topical usage in poisonous bites, stings, infected wounds, and as a general first aid remedy, as well as internally-predominantly for the digestive type bugs. Whenever I travel abroad I always have Oregon Grape powder with me, and it has totally saved me a few times from bad water. Dosage is usually around 1 tsp per dose for internal use. It can simply be mixed in a little bit of water and drank down. Topical usage is simply as needed.

Formulation Strategies
Let’s take a look at some of the different ways Oregon Grape can be combined with other remedies in order to bring out its unique qualities, as well as to balance out its humoral energetics and actions.

Simple Bitter Pair
Oregon Grape (Mahonia aquifolium)
Dandelion root (Taraxacum officinale)

This is a great simple bitter pair that is mild to moderate in action. It’s a great place to start for a digestive formula (often combined with carminatives- see below), as well as a liver formula. This pair will gently, yet effectively get the liver moving. I like Oregon Grape because it’s right in the middle as far as its action on the liver, definitely not mild, but not crazy strong like some other herbs. The next formula brings in some stronger bitters to be combined with Oregon Grape.

Strong Bitter Triplet
Oregon Grape (Mahonia aquifolium) 40%
Gentian (Gentiana lutea) 40%
Greater Celandine (Chelidonium majus) 20%

Here we see some majorly strong bitter remedies combined with Oregon Grape. Gentian is in my opinion one of the strongest true bitters. Greater Celandine is really strong as well, so strong that it shouldn’t be used in too large of a dose, hence it’s lower amount in the formula. This compound is pretty strongly cholagouge and choleretic, and would be a great for flushing the liver, gall bladder, biliary tubules, and portal circulation. It’s a very cold formula though, and warming remedies should be considered.

Bitter Carminative Formula
Oregon Grape (Mahonia aquifolium) 30%
Dandelion root (Taraxacum officinale) 30%
Fennel (Foeniculum vulgare) 25%
Ginger (Zingiber officinale) 15%

Here we have the combination of 2 mild-moderate bitters with Oregon Grape and Dandelion, which would be ultimately quite cooling, and combine it with 2 nice warming carminatives Fennel and Ginger. The reason the ratios are as they are is because some Ginger extracts are quite warm and lower amounts are needed. With the Ginger spagyric I prepared, we could probably drop it down to 5% and the Ginger would still dominate the flavor of the formula.
But, this formula would ultimately have a strong drying effect on the GI over the long term, so we might adjunct it a little more to look like this:

**Balance Bitter Carminative Formula**
- Oregon Grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*) 30%
- Dandelion root (*Taraxacum officinale*) 30%
- Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) 25%
- Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) 10%
- Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) 5%

The addition of Licorice to the formula here helps to balance out the long term drying effects of the other plants, as well as improve the flavor a little bit. Other demulcents can be used as well, such as Marshmallow (*Althea officinalis*) or Slippery Elm (*Ulmus rubra*), although if this is to be delivered as a tincture these 2 remedies would need to be taken separately as a cold infusion or powder.

**Liver Tonic Formula**
- Milk Thistle (*Silybum marianum*) 30%
- Schizandra (*Schisandra chinensis*) 30%
- Oregon Grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*) 20%
- St. John’s Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) 10%
- Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) 10%

This is a great 5 herb formula to support the overall health and functioning of the liver. It focuses on trophorestoratives, lead by Milk Thistle and Schizandra berry. These are classic remedies to help restore a weak, atrophied, or depressed liver function. Oregon Grape helps to stimulate it into greater activity through it’s bitter tonic action, as well as detoxification. St. John’s Wort and Rosemary are here to warm the formula up, as well as add to the detoxifying action- many people don’t think of these as liver remedies but they are for sure. This could be used daily for long term liver support.

**Skin Formula**
- Burdock (*Arctium lappa*) 25%
- Oregon Grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*) 25%
- Sarsaparilla (*Smilax ornata*) 15%
- Yellow Dock (*Rumex crispus*) 15%
- Nettle leaf (*Urtica dioica*) 10%
- Horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*) 10%

*From Sharol Tilgner. This is a great alterative formula that features a lead pair of Burdock and Oregon Grape to clean the liver and blood, with Yellow Dock as a similar supportive remedy. Sarsaparilla is a nice warming blood purifier and circulatory stimulant which warms up the formula nicely. Nettles and Horsetail here provide a nice broad spectrum nutrient profile, as well as a diuretic action to flush out the kidneys and further purify the blood.

**Hoxsey Based Formula**

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Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense*) 15-30%
Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) 15-30%
Burdock (*Arctium lappa*) 10-15%
Oregon Grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*) 10-15%
Cascara (*Rhamnus purshiana*) 3-10%
Buckthorn (*Rhamnus frangula*) 3-10%
Poke (*Phytolacca decandra*) 3-10%
Queen’s root (*Stillingia sylvatica*) 3-10%
Prickly Ash (*Zanthoxylum clava-herculitis*) 3-10%
Wild Indigo (*Baptisia tinctoria*) 3-10%
Lugol’s iodine (*Potassium iodide*) 1-3%

*From Sharol Tilgner, based on the classic Hoxsey formula. This is a broad spectrum alterative formula that was developed by a physician by the name of Hoxsey for the treatment of cancer. It is a pretty laxative formula, but is also cleansing the liver, blood, and lymphatics. The iodine is used to purify the blood, and stimulate thyroid function- thus raising endogenous metabolism and therefore detoxification. I kept Sharol’s percentage ranges here because it is a relatively large formula (I rarely make formulas this large) and I am unsure as to the traditional ratios. There are also a handful of remedies here of which I am unfamiliar with, but I included it here to show 1) an example of a larger formula and 2) the presence of Oregon Grape is a classic formula used in cancer treatment.

**Digestive Infection**

Oregon Grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*) 40%
Sweet Annie (*Artemesia annua*) 40%
Cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*) 20%

This should be prepared as a decoction… good luck getting it down (it is guaranteed to taste awful), but if you have a serious infection in the GI this would likely take care of it. Oregon Grape is purely bitter, whereas the Sweet Annie is bitter and aromatic, the Cloves being purely aromatic and warming. Thus it is relatively constitutionally balanced.

**Urinary Tract Infection Triplet**

Oregon Grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*) 33.3%
Uva-Ursi (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) 33.3%
Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) 33.3%

This simple 3 herb formula is a disinfectant to the urinary tract via 3 different biochemical mechanisms of action. The Oregon Grape as we have seen has the berberine alkaloid which is directly excreted in the urine, lending a topical antiseptic effect. Yarrow has antiseptic essential oils which are excreted in the urine, and Uva-Ursi contains the compound arbutin, which is biochemically converted into a different compound (hydroquinone) which is antiseptic for the urinary tract. Thus we have 3 totally different mechanisms for cleansing the urinary tract. We might combine these 3 herbs with some others to lend it a stronger diuretic action and to moisten any dryness.
Urinary Tract Infection Formula
Oregon Grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*) 20%
Uva-Ursi (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) 20%
Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) 20%
Goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis*) 10%
Nettle (*Urtica dioica*) 10%
Horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*) 10%
Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) 10%

Here we added 5 diuretic remedies: Goldenrod, Nettle, and Horsetail. These remedies will really help to flush the kidneys and urinary tract out stronger, and deliver the antiseptic herbs to the desired site of action. The addition of Licorice helps to moisten the drying properties of the formula. I would also say that using Marshmallow root (*Althea officinalis*) as a powder or cold infusion would be ideal as well, more ideal actually, as it has a stronger affinity for the urinary tract than Licorice does. The above would work well as a tincture, though teas are typically considered superior for treating the urinary tract, as water already has a diuretic action.

Energetic Architecture
Determining the Energetic Architecture of a plant can be rather complex, as plants are not exactly straightforward and able to be boxed into nice neat and tidy categories all the time. It’s important to remember that this system of classification is flexible. It is really used for determining how a particular plant is to be prepared according to the methods delineated within the spagyric and alchemical tradition. This is where herbalism becomes a balance of science and art. We can look at a plant through many different lenses, and depending on which lens we look at it through we might see a different layer of correspondence to any particular Planet, Element or Philosophical Principle.

This method of classification of plants is really focused on revealing the essential nature of the herb, including its habitat, shape, texture, morphology, color, actions, energetics, affinities, uses and properties, as well as its psycho-spiritual attributes. It is when we look at the ruling Planet, Element and Principle that we are then able to unlock the esoteric significance of the plant- that is, how it relates to the archetypes of the Tarot and the Qabalistic Tree of Life.

I will mention below a spectrum of correspondences are they apply to Oregon Grape to illustrate the flexibility of this system, and how they come together to determine various levels of esoteric significance.

- **Ruling Planet:** In my opinion, there are a few different possible planetary rulers of Oregon Grape. The first is Mars. This plant exhibits many signatures of the red planet, most notably the intensity of its morphology- with its sharp pokey serrated leaf margins, and the red coloration of the some of the leaves in the autumn (some stay evergreen). We see that it is a distinctly cooling plant, beneficial for treating excess heat conditions in the body (which are ruled by Mars).
We also see that Oregon Grape exerts a strong influence upon the blood, to quote the Eclectic John Scudder “It is both a blood maker and a blood cleanser, and as there is no known remedy so virulent to microorganisms of nearly all varieties, as healthy blood serum, berberis comes, indirectly if not directly, a microbicide.” This quote also brings up another layer of correspondence to Mars as it directly kills bacteria and pathogens. As the planet of war, battle, and bloodshed, Mars is classically associated with immune system and killing of invading pathogens. While Oregon Grape is not necessarily an immune stimulant- or even acting on the immune system at all- the plant itself kills bacteria, a distinctly Mars quality.

The other aspect of Oregon Grape that I find to be particularly Martian in nature is that it is a stimulant- not in the sense of something like Coffee… but it is directly stimulating to the
digestion, the liver, gall bladder, the kidneys, lymphatics etc. It gets things moving, and Mars is associated with this stimulant property.

On the other hand, this plant also displays many correspondences and relationships to the planet Jupiter, king of the planets. We see this in the yellow coloration of the flowers and roots, as well as the strong bitter taste. Jupiter rules the liver, bile, fats and oils, and the metabolic functions of the body, and as you have learned, Oregon Grape is a powerful remedy for the liver and digestion of fats and oils. Oftentimes people with a strong Jupiter in their constitution, or afflicted in any way, there tends to be an issue with metabolism-most often displaying as an excess of the damp/stagnation tissue state, ama, excess kapha, and a tendency towards the bad blood pattern/toxicity. Again, Oregon Grape being a strong alterative plant acts upon the entire Jupiter pattern, making this also a strong potential ruler for this herb.

The question is not necessarily which one is right or wrong. From the perspective of alchemy, the question is **what qualities of the herb do you want to express most strongly in your preparation of the medicine?** Do you want to bring out the effects on the blood and the Mars qualities, or do you want to bring out the more liver detoxification properties through Jupiter? This is where the spagyric process moves into the realm of Art, and Oregon Grape prepared under Mars is likely to be a **very** different kind of medicine than Oregon Grape prepared under the influence of Jupiter.

**Ruling Element:** Taking the flexibility of the system into consideration, let’s look at the Elements, of which I see 2 possible correspondences. The first would be the Water Element. We see the relationship to this Element first off in the plants preferred growth habitat. More often than not, *Mahonia* species like to grow where there is an abundance of water. In the Pacific Northwest it loves the damp parts of the forest and grows in overwhelming abundance. Where I live now in southern Oregon it is much more sparse, but where it does grow is in the shady watery parts of the woods, and along the rivers. We also see the relationship to the Water Element in its therapeutic properties in regards to the treatment of the damp/stagnation tissue state which we went into great detail in above. It does have a slight affinity for the kidneys and urinary tract, which are governed by the water, but this isn’t a very strong correspondence as it isn’t really considered a primary remedy for the urinary tract.

The other Elemental ruler of Oregon Grape could be Fire. These are essentially the same correspondences mentioned above for Mars- sharp leaf margins, red coloration of the leaves, cooling remedy to treat excess heat, and it’s direct antiseptic properties against a wide variety of pathogens. It’s stimulating quality to the organ systems is also a fiery quality, even though it has a constitutional cooling effect.

This brings up an important concept in the process of determining a plant’s Energetic Architecture, and illustrates the flexibility of the system. If we were to say that Oregon Grape is primarily ruled by the planet Mars, then the Fire Element does not make sense for its Elemental ruler, because all of the qualities of Fire are taken up by the Mars correspondence. In that case it makes more sense to relate it to the Water Element, which
covers a completely different territory of the properties of this plant. If we were to
correspond it to Jupiter (which covers a lot of what would be taken up by the Water
Element), then corresponding it to Fire makes more sense. Hopefully this shows you how
things can go back and forth a little bit and adjusted to fine what matches the essential
nature of the plant.

• **Ruling Principle:** For the 3 Philosophical Principles of Alchemy, there are once again 2
possible correspondences. The first would be the Salt Principle, which is associated with the
kapha dosha, and the fixed mode of astrology. This is shown by the fact that we are using
the roots of the plant as the primary part of the medicine, as well as that it is commonly used
to treat kapha type diseases of the body, with an excess accumulation of the Earth and
Water Elements (which is what the salt/kapha principle is composed of). The remedy is also
used to treat more fixed or chronic diseases seated deeply within the body, as opposed to
more acute short term problems.

The other possible correspondence here would be the Sulfur Principle, which relates to the
pitta dosha and the cardinal mode of astrology. This would be synonymous (essentially)
pattern we see in the Fire Element and Mars- the prickly morphology, treating heat
patterns, red leaf coloration, yellow color of flowers and roots. Again if we were to go with
either Mars or Fire, it would not really make sense to associated Sulfur/cardinal, as those
qualities are already being taken up by the Planet or Element.

This all ultimately lead me to a few different constellations of the Energetic Architecture of
Oregon Grape. I’ve been thinking about all of this with this plant for a really long time
(probably the last 7 years) and honestly it’s been a tricky plant for me to really commit to a
particular set of correspondences. But here’s what I have:

Mars-Fixed/Salt-Water and Jupiter-Cardinal/Sulfur-Earth

I’ll describe these in more detail below under esoteric significance, but just to mention the
Earth Element in the second set there, this would essentially take up the Salt/Fixed
correspondence mentioned under Ruling Principle. The way these are related to one another
is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st Set</th>
<th>2nd Set</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mars</td>
<td>Jupiter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixed/Salt</td>
<td>Cardinal/Sulfur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Earth</td>
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</tbody>
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**Esoteric Significance**

If we take a look at these different sets of Energetic Architecture, we see that they both
honestly match up with the plant pretty nicely, just focusing on different aspects of the
remedy. Mars-Fixed-Water corresponds very strongly to the archetype of Scorpio, who is
ruled by Mars classically, and is a Fixed-Water sign. If one were to look closely at Oregon
Grape, it actually looks a lot like a scorpion, with the leaves looking like the pincers, and the
roots snaking through the soil like the tail. Not to mention the roots resemble snakes….
Scorpio rules the colon, detoxification, elimination, and stagnation— all of which the remedy works on.

This correspondence matches up with the 5 of Cups— Disappointment, a card also referred to as “the waters of stagnation!” This card is associated with depression, loneliness, isolation, and an overall sense of feeling disappointed with life. We could think of this as being a deficiency of the solar plexus, a low energy state— represented by the dried up sea and emptiness of the goblets. Crowley mentions the card being “in its worst aspect the putrefying power of Water,” which is a pretty clear statement of the physiological state Oregon Grape is remedial for. This card also tends to reflect the negative impacts of the subconscious on the conscious mind, often manifesting as chronic negative thought patterns— or worse case scenario thinking (remember the flower essence qualities about paranoia). So this card seems to relate to Oregon Grape quite nicely, much nicer in my opinion than the next but I’ll lay the next one out too again to illustrate the flexibility of the Energetic Architecture system of correspondence and classification.

The second possible card correspondence is the 2 of Disks— Change. This is associated with the architecture of Jupiter-Cardinal-Earth. The combination of Cardinal-Earth gives us the sign of Capricorn, the sea-goat, a classically willful sign that I tend to connect to the solar plexus. This relates nicely from the medical perspective, as Capricorn rules the gallbladder, the organ oftentimes associated with will power and personal strength. Of course, Oregon Grape as we have seen is a strong remedy for the gallbladder, as well as the liver, which Jupiter rules.

The card is about the power of polarity, of opposition, and how opposites are not really separate, just 2 ends of one spectrum of wholeness. It is about the polarities of life: night and day, male and female, light and dark, yin and yang— and the age old adage that the only unchanging thing about life is change itself. Everything changes. Everything transforms. I think of this card relating to Oregon Grape in the sense that the plant is really used for physical stagnation and stuckness— things are not moving and there is a need for a physiological shift or change. Not just in the physiology, but in the life patterns that generated that physical expression.

I find it interesting that the 2 of Disks’ primary symbol is the ouroborus, the snake eating its own tail— a symbol of regeneration, life and death, and transformation (a common symbol in alchemy actually). In both of these cards we see the symbol of the snake— one through Scorpio, the other on the card itself— and to me the way Oregon Grape roots grow is distinctly snake-like, how they go back and forth under the soil in zig-zag fashion. Jupiter in Capricorn represents the necessity for expansion and growth in the practical areas of our live, our work, and in a way that is solid, tactile and real. This is not just the concept of change, but actual change.

These are the 2 cards I find relate pretty well to Oregon Grape, though I would say I prefer the 5 of Cups to the 2 of Disks personally. The first relates more to the digestive and blood aspects of the blood, whereas the latter relates more to the liver, gall bladder, and metabolic aspects of the plant (looking at it physiologically).
This is a great tool to understand our plants in more depth, to see into their true essential nature, and begin to understand their archetypal expressions and initiatic virtues into a higher level of awareness, thus facilitating the evolutionary process of the Soul. This is the core principle of the Evolutionary Herbalism model, that the plants are not just our healers, but our teachers as well. When we connect with them deeply to the point of becoming one with them, we begin to realize that these plants are threads in the vast invisible landscape that is the territory of myth, of archetype, of the deeper meanings embedded within the world. There is something more to the botanical being, and that something more is what is lacking from most models of herbal medicine. That something more is what I am trying to bring back to life through the Evolutionary Herbalism model.