HISTORY:

Oregon Grape is related to the Barberry plant that grows in some variation throughout the world and has even been identified as a valuable medicinal plant used in ancient Egypt.

To treat fevers, the bitter root of the plant was crushed and mixed with fennel seed in order to counteract the bitterness that is characteristic of this plant.

Oregon Grape has a long history of use as a medicine among Native Northwest people. It was used for many centuries as a remedy for a multitude of ailments, from internal bacterial infections to skin ailments such as psoriasis. The root was the most sought after part of the plant as it contained the medicinal properties and the “grapes,” the name given the fruit after European settlers first encountered it, were used primarily as flavoring for food.

According to the Doctrine of Signatures, a European diagnostic system used by herbalists, the plants used in herbal medicine largely resembled the body parts they were linked to treating. For example, the yellow bark of the Oregon grape was associated with liver illnesses, as yellowish skin can be an indication of liver malfunction.

The grape itself provided Northwestern residents with a good source of fruit during times of scarce resources. Many Depression era canners made jam out of Oregon grape berries with good results.

BERBERIDACEAE, MAHONIA AQUIFOLIUM. Oregon grape (Oregon State flower)

Indians always used the fruit. The wood is bright yellow and Indians made yellow dye by steeping twigs and bark in water. Roots are of medicinal value.

Beneficial Uses:  
As a purely bitter herb, Oregon grape root is used easily with Traditional Chinese Medicine, having the same function and only a little less potency than coptis. Like coptis, Oregon grape root is useful in treating the various symptoms of "damp heat," such as, Abdominal fullness and distention, Constipation alternating with diarrhea, Foul-smelling loose stools, General feeling of heaviness, Nausea, Reduced appetite, Reduced thirst although with the sensation of dry mouth, Sticky, thick, and yellow or green mucous discharges, Watery, oozing skin eruptions, and "Red" symptoms: red tongue, hot flushes, bad temper, rapid pulse.

(Practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine are likely to note that Oregon grape root is less appropriate than coptis in treating syndromes in which there is a "deficiency of Yin," an inherent tendency to lose fluids.)

Oregon grape roots best-researched application in modern herbal medicine, however, is in the treatment of chronic inflammatory skin conditions, such as psoriasis.

Oregon grape root and other herbs that contain berberine are scientifically proven to protect against bacteria, viruses, fungi, protozoans, helminthes (worms), and chlamydia. Conditions treated by Oregon grape root include bacterial diarrhea, intestinal parasites, and ocular trachoma.

Oregon grape root may increase blood platelet counts and counteract the proliferation of cancerous tumors of the bladder and colon.

It has a sedative effect on the smooth muscles lining the digestive tract and can relieve stomach cramps and abdominal pain.

Why use Oregon grape root as a whole herb? Why not just take a berberine concentrate? Oregon grape root contains tannins that cross link proteins in the linings of the nose and throat, or in the digestive tract, to seal them against infection.

The tannins may also explain the herb's usefulness in treating psoriasis, a condition characterized by the over-rapid multiplication of cells in the skin. In at least one clinical study, a cream containing Oregon grape root eased inflammation, irritation, and itching.

Herbal Tea Making

"A medicinal herbal tea is a hot water extract of an herb". Medicinal herbal teas are often referred to as herbal infusions; They are usually made much stronger than common beverage teas. To make your own, place enough fresh or dried herb in a tea cup (or, tea brewing pot) to fill it 1/4 full. Add enough boiling water to the herb to fill the cup (or, tea brewing pot) completely. Cover the cup (or, tea brewing pot) and allow the herb to steep in the hot water for about 5 to 7 minutes before drinking. When using a tea brewing pot you can strain the tea by pouring it thru a tea strainer held above the cup, or you can use a large tea ball to hold the herb while in the pot, if desired. Also, a small tea ball can be used to hold the herb while brewing in a cup. Tea made from thick roots, nuts and stems should be simmered (rather than steeped) for about 30 minutes and are often referred to as decoctions.

Oregon Grape Root

The tea or tincture may also be used for mild salmonella.
Oregon Grape Jam
Yield 7 Half Pints

3 lb ripe Oregon grapes (approx. 4-5 qt.)
*Note* We added 2 cups huckleberries and a 12 oz. pkg of wild blueberries from eastern Canada
2 cups of water
1 cup sugar per cup of juice
*Note* reduced to ½ cup per cup juice and it was still very sweet
*Note* 2 TB lemon juice to counteract sweetness

Wash and stem 3 lb. of fully ripened grapes (Mahonia aquifolium) and place into a large pot with 2 cups of cold water.
Cook until fruit softens and juice runs freely.
Remove from heat and press the juicy pulp through a food mill or run briefly in a food processor. *must be done in several batches.
Recover the juicy pulp, measure and add 1 cup or sugar to each cup of juice.
Return mixture to pot
Mix thoroughly
Bring to boil and simmer 15 minutes, stirring constantly.
*Note* Should increase simmering time until mixture has thickened.

Meanwhile, wash 7, ½ pint jars.
Keep hot until needed
Prepare lids as manufacturer directs

When jam has cooked for 15 minutes, remove from heat and skim off the foam.
Ladle hot jam into 1 hot jar at a time, leaving ¼” head space
Wipe jam rim with clean damp cloth
Attach lid
Fill and close remaining jars.
Process in a boiling water bath for 10 minuets.
What to Do if You Forego the Pectin and Your Jam Doesn’t Set:

It’s still a tasty sauce! The health benefits are still there and by blending it you can eliminate some of the seediness.

Oregon Grape Smoothie

1 ½ C. Nancy’s (or similar) plain yogurt
1 ½ cups vanilla ice cream
4 TB Oregon grape jam
3 to 6 ice cubes

Place all ingredients in blender and blend for about 40 seconds or until ice is broken up. Pour into glasses. Enjoy!
Makes about 3-4 servings.

Other Uses of Unset Jam:

Sauce for chicken, salmon or other meats
Spoon as a sauce over plain vanilla ice cream
Use in sauce reduction with sherry, pine nuts and sweet onion
Spoon over Ritz crackers
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Huckleberry picture:  

Oregon Grape pictures:  

Wild Canadian Blueberry picture:  

Oregon grape root:  