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## **Wildflowers~ Brenan Simpson**

I have a theory. When the Romans invaded Britain two thousand years ago, they failed miserably to conquer the Highland Scots and didn't even try to take on the Irish. As a result, those hardy peoples whose names begin with Mac or one of its abbreviations were never romanized and to this day it is unacceptable to try to turn their names into latin. Now a prime example of this relates to a particular plant, which someone decided to name after an Irish-American botanist, Bernard M'Mahon. In order to comply with what one might call the Simpson Rule, the prefix had to be dropped, leaving the remainder to be latinized as Mahonia. To complicate the issue slightly, as far as anyone knows, this plant has no connection whatsoever with Mr. M'Mahon. It was actually discovered by David Douglas, after whom the Douglas Fir is named. He, incidentally, was merely a lowland Scot, so when it came to putting his name into latin and calling a very pretty little alpine plant which he had also found a Douglasia, that was acceptable under the rule.

David Douglas was sent to the Pacific North West by his employer, the Royal Horticultural Society, to collect specimens of whatever new plant species he came across. Based in Fort Vancouver, near the mouth of the Columbia River, he travelled extensively throughout this whole area and shipped back to England a considerable number of plants which had never been seen there before. Included amongst these was the plant which was later called the Mahonia. It was so well received that, for several years, individual plants were selling there for ten pounds each, a sum which would have had an equivalent purchasing power of about two thousand of today's dollars.

But the story doesn't end there. When the experts in England saw the plant, they decided that it belonged to a family already known as Berberis or Barberry, a name derived from the Berbers of North Africa, from whom we have also got

the Berber carpet. The Berbers too had been conquered by the Romans, so it's alright that the plant was named after them. To



distinguish this new plant from its relatives, it was given the second name aquifolia, meaning water on the leaves, because they looked all wet and shiny.

So there we have it, the Berberis aquifolia,

the Mahonia, the Oregon Grape, a common wild plant of open or partially shaded areas on all of the Islands. It is an evergreen shrub, generally around two or three feet high here. Its leaves are very similar to those of holly but older leaves often turn a bright scarlet in colour, adding to the beauty of the plant. Bright yellow clusters of small flowers in the spring are followed in late summer by dark purple berries, looking exactly like tiny grapes, which is why the plant has the common name which it carries.

As a footnote, David Douglas came to a sticky end when he went on from here to the Hawaiian Islands to continue his plant collecting. A wild bull, apparently objecting to the removal of native species from their proper habitat, gored him to death. There's a moral in that somewhere.

*Brenan's wildflower articles are also published as a book *Flowers at My Feet: West Wildflowers in Legend, Literature and Lore.**

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