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PATRICE HANLON

## NOW GROWING: Berberis aquifolium arrives early

Contra Costa Times

Article Launched: 12/28/2007 03:32:09 PM PST

Every other week, Patrice Hanlon, garden manager at Walnut Creek's Gardens at Heather Farm, writes about plants in the garden that grow well in the fertile Bay Area.

A HINT OF spring can be found in the Gardens at Heather Farm as the lemon yellow flowers of Berberis aquifolium are just beginning to bloom in the lower end of the California native garden.

Commonly known as Oregon grape, this tough shrub has glossy holly-like leaves that are armed with thorns, and have the appearance of being wet, hence the name "aquifolium."

The small, bright yellow flowers growing in clusters along the stem are a cheerful addition to the winter garden. Blooming begins in winter and continues through spring. The deep green leaves of summer take on a bronzy-red color in the fall when this shrub is full of grape-colored berries that towhees, finches and robins love.

Growing from underground rhizomes, Oregon grape forms a thicket or hedge that makes a wonderful screen or barrier in the garden. It is a low maintenance plant as it only needs light pruning to control the height, and that should be done right after blooming so next season's buds are not removed.

Old canes can be removed and it also can be taken to the ground to encourage fresh growth. At the Gardens at Heather Farm, we allow it to grow naturally so it has formed a large thicket that stands 6 feet tall and 6 feet wide.

Lewis and Clark first wrote about this shrub on their journeys in 1806. They found it growing

Click photo to enlarge



Yellow buds on the Berberis aquifolium -- Oregon grape... (Patrice Hanlon/Gardens at Heather Farm)

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in British Columbia, but its range also includes dry, open and wooded slopes below 7,000 feet throughout northern California. Even then, botanists could not decide what genus this plant belonged to so during the years it has sometimes been listed as Mahonia aquifolium. Current taxonomists once again have classified it as Berberis aquifolium.

Berberis grows well in a variety of garden situations and is not susceptible to any major problems. It tolerates sun to partial shade and can take infrequent to occasional water once it is established.

Because of its size, Berberis aquifolium may not be suited for a small garden, but there are smaller varieties such as Berberis aquifolium "Compacta," which grows 1 to 3 feet high. Creeping barberry – Berberis aquifolium var. repens – spreads by rhizomes creating small drifts that would be excellent for a hillside as it only reaches 1 to 2 feet tall.

December's waning light and cooler days gives the gardener a chance to relax, and a walk in the garden is a wonderful way to spend an afternoon. The Gardens at Heather Farm always has something of interest, even during the quiet days of winter as the California Native section continues to brighten the garden as many of the other shrubs begin blooming during January and February.

For more information about the Gardens at Heather Farm, visit <http://www.gardenshf.org>, or visit in person at 1540 Marchbanks Drive, Walnut Creek.

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