

Myrtlewood

By Frank A. Lang

Oregon-myrtle (*Umbellularia californica*) grows along the Pacific Coast from Douglas County, Oregon, to San Diego, California, in the Coast and Klamath mountains and along the west slope of the Sierra Nevada. The tree is also known as California-laurel, California bay laurel, pepperwood, or some fifteen other common names. The oft-repeated claim that this tree grows "here and in the Holy Land" is false. *Umbellularia californica* grows only on the west coast of the United States.

Oregon-myrtle grows under various topographic and soil conditions if moisture conditions are adequate. The Oregon Champion tree, 4.7 feet in diameter and 88 feet tall, is near Lobster Creek, Curry County, Oregon. In the right setting and climate, Oregon-myrtle, with its handsome willow-like evergreen leaves, clusters of yellow flowers, and relatively large yellow-green fruits, makes a fine ornamental planting.

The odor of the aromatic plant is pungent enough to cause sneezing and headaches when leaves are crushed and sniffed. Culinary use is discouraged because it contains umbellulone, a toxic mucous irritant, and safrole, a known carcinogen. One acceptable culinary use is to place a leaf or two in flour or cornmeal as an insecticide to keep the mealworms away.

Native Americans used *Umbellularia* as a medicine to treat various ailments, from headaches and menstrual cramps, to washing vermin from the head. Seeds were eaten roasted or raw. One group used the smoke to drive ground squirrels from their burrows, and to rid themselves of fleas.

Oregon-myrtle's fine-grained, relatively heavy wood is easily machined into woodenware (salad bowls, spoons), gifts, and novelty items. Other uses include gunstocks, trim, cabinetry, paneling, and veneer. Oregon-myrtle and its wood products provide a small, but significant source of income for small mills and crafters in southwest Oregon and California.

Sources

Arno, S.F. and R.P. Hammerly. *Northwest Trees: identifying and understanding our native trees*. Revised Ed. Seattle: Mountaineers, 2007.

Mabberley, D.J. *Mabberley's Plant Book: a portable dictionary of plants, their classification and uses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Moerman D.E. *Native American Ethnobotany*. Portland, Oregon: Timber Press, 1998.

The Oregon Encyclopedia

<http://oregonhist-oep-dev.azurewebsites.net/articles/myrtlewood/>