For many years, I have been occasionally asked, “What plant will grow under my redwood trees?” It’s always a pleasure to be able to provide a fruitful reply. A wonderful Northern California native that thrives under redwoods (Sequoia sempervirens) grown around Redding is Mahonia aquifolium, more commonly known as Oregon grape holly.

Oregon grape holly has no resemblance to a grape vine other than the color of its berries, but it’s a bit holly like in that it has shiny, dark green leaves that have prickly edges. Mahonia aquifolium is a multi-stemmed upright evergreen sub-shrub that spreads nicely by way of creeping rhizomes. It’s native from Northern California, through Oregon and Washington, into British Columbia. It grows to about 5 feet tall and eventually as wide. With its spiny leaves, it makes a good hedge and generally should be planted in areas where you don’t intend to keep it contained or do much pruning.

Mahonia aquifolium provides year-round interest. From late February until May, it displays showy clusters of fragrant, yellow flowers. Those flowers are followed by bunches of edible berries that are enjoyed by birds and other wildlife, including humans. The berries become fully ripe and are best consumed after a late-summer cold spell. They make wonderful jellies and preserves. In the fall, the deep green leaves begin to take on a reddish hue and are attractive used as holiday table decorations and wreath accents.

Flourishing in US Department of Agriculture zones 5 to 9, Oregon grape holly is deer resistant. Other attributes are that it’s very useful for erosion
control as a result of its ability to spread through underground rhizomes. It can be easily propagated from cuttings taken in November after a frost. And, it has many medicinal uses as prescribed by the Native Americans. Most of those can be found in a Google search.

In Redding, *Mahonia aquifolium* prefers dappled shade and protection from mid-day and western sun. It performs best with good drainage, but seems to grow fine in Shasta County’s clay soil. If you choose to prune it on occasion, cut back new shoots right after flowering, and prune to the ground any dead or leggy branches. Growing in its natural habitat in Humboldt and Trinity counties, it requires no supplemental irrigation. But in Shasta County, it will need occasional summer water.

When looking for *Mahonia aquifolium* at nurseries, you may also find two more species that will function well in your garden. The first is a smaller species of Oregon grape holly known as *Mahonia compacta*. It has similar habitat requirements, but grows to a smaller mature size of 3 feet × 3 feet. The other plant is *Mahonia repens*. It’s a superb groundcover that will do quite well as an understory plant or on shady slopes in the Redding area.

You will find Oregon grape holly growing in the I-5 highway dividers north from Mt. Shasta on into Oregon and Washington. Locally, you can find a specimen plant in the Matson Mowder Howe Celebration Garden in Caldwell Park.

Enjoy the ever-changing aesthetic of this lush-looking native. And next time you are struggling with plants growing under your redwoods, try a species of *Mahonia*. 

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*Mahonia aquifolium* as a foundation planting.
Photo by Michele Driggs.