



BARBERRY

BARBERRY (*zerešk*; *Berberis* spp., family Berberidaceae). Species of this genus are found in the northern, eastern, and southeastern highlands of Iran (Alborz, Qaradāg in Azarbaijan, ranges of Khorasan, Bārez mountain in Kermān). They reach heights of 1 to 3 m, seldom reaching 4 m, and have long branches, copious thorns, denticulate leaves, and red berries which form in clusters on the outer branches in midspring, after the yellow flowers have shed their petals, and ripen in midsummer. Dried berries of *Berberis integerrima* Dunge have culinary and pharmaceutical uses. The shrub and the berries are both called *zerešk* in most of Iran, *zārj* or *zārač* in parts of the south (in northern Iran *zerešk* usually designates the species *Berberis vulgaris* L., in other parts *Berberis integerrima* Bunge). In Persian medical books the terms *anbarbārīs* (Ebn Boṭlān, p. 86; Jorjānī, p. 471.9ff.), *anbarbīrīs*, *zerešk* (Heravī, p. 13 and n.), *zerek* (Aḳawaynī, p. 119), *zartak*, *zarak* (Amīrī, p. 40), *barbārīs*, and *ambarbārīs* (Dehḳodā, s.vv.) are often used (*barbārīs*, etc., may be of Syriac origin; Amīrī, loc. cit.).

In cookery, barberries (especially from *Berberis integerrima*) are added as a flavoring to soups, polows, and chicken stuffing. A refreshing sherbet made from water drained from barberries and sugar is thought to be useful for getting rid of bile, i.e., curing biliousness. To make *zerešk-polow* washed barberries are sprinkled on strained boiled rice, more rice is poured on top, and the dish is then simmered. Addition of barberries to various sorts of soups imparts pleasant tartness. Cleaned chickens are stuffed with barberries and rice, walnuts, or other ingredients before being roasted or cooked.



In traditional medicine, barberries are classed as a cold, dry substance and thought to possess the properties that check diarrhea; strengthen the stomach, liver, and heart; eliminate excess bile; relieve thirst; and cool stomach heat, internal inflammations, and blood ebullition. Mixtures of barberries with hot drugs are considered useful for relief of blockages of the liver, bowels, and intestines; for cure of dysentery caused by coldness and weakness of the liver and bowels; and generally for the treatment of patients afflicted with cold (*mabrūdīn*). A barberry-wormwood mixture is thought to improve digestion, and barberry juice to prevent vomiting and fainting. The berries are said to cure stomach ulcers and dysentery due to bowel weakness and barberry poultices to relieve acute abscesses. A mixture of barberry, apple, and lemon juices with sugar is believed to counteract dangerous poisons and to cure snakebite, palpitations, vomiting, and loss of appetite. Eating barberries, however, is thought to cause flatulence (remediable with cloves) and dryness and constipation (remediable with sugar and sweets). The bark from the bush's stem, called *ʿūd al-rīḥ* in Arabic and *ārgīs* in Persian medical books, has similar medicinal properties. A drink made by infusion of the bark in hot water is thought to have a tonic effect on the liver when it is afflicted by cold, and rinsing the mouth with this liquid is thought to heal gumboils, strengthen the gums, and ease toothache. A concentrated decoction of the bark is used in the form of drops to relieve chronic eye diseases and as an enema to cleanse the liver and heal intestinal ulcers. From the wood and bark is extracted a yellow dye called berberine, used for dyeing wool for carpets and tanning leather.

In Persian literature, teardrops (*serešk*) are likened to barberries (*zerešk*). In modern colloquial usage, when somebody gets unduly nervous or excited, those present will bid him or her to calm down by saying “*Zerešk!*” or “*Āb(-e) zerešk!*” This idiom evidently refers to the supposed antibilious and antimelancholic properties of barberries and their juice.

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