

# Western aralia: The Applegate's only native plant in the ginseng family

BY SUZIE SAVOIE

*Aralia californica* can be referred to by any of its many common names: western aralia, western spikenard, California ginseng, or elk clover. Western aralia's large, green leaves grow on thick, non-woody stems. This lush plant gracefully arches to a mature height of from three to nine feet, but sometimes it can reach to an impressive ten feet. This is very tall for an herbaceous perennial plant that dies back fully to the ground each fall, only to return the next spring from its thick, snakelike roots, which are often embedded in rocks. Considering its relative tenderness, Western aralia is a very big and robust plant.

The broad, compound leaves have a tropical look, but western aralia's natural distribution ranges from southern California to as far north as Linn County in Oregon's western Cascades. Western aralia has an affinity for moist gulches, stream banks, canyons, and other cool, shady locations at elevations generally below 5,000 feet. Western aralia can be found, uncommonly, in such locations throughout the Applegate Valley.

In early to midsummer, western aralia produces ball-like clusters of greenish white, sticky flowers that mature into

ornamental, dark purple berries in the fall. The juicy berries are about the size of peppercorns and have a pungent, ginseng-like flavor.

One of the common names, elk clover, is a bit of a misnomer since *Aralia californica* is not really a clover at all; in fact, it is a member of the genus *Araliaceae*, or the ginseng family. It is one of only two native plants in Oregon in the ginseng family; the other being Devil's Club (*Oplopanax horridus*), found mainly in northwestern Oregon. Western aralia is the only member of the ginseng family that grows wild in the Applegate Valley. It is related to American spikenard (*Aralia racemosa*) and wild sarsaparilla (*Aralia nudicaulis*), plants native to the Midwest and eastern United States, and prized, as is western aralia, for their medicinal uses.

According to wildlands advocate Wendell Wood, western aralia was "historically used by the Karok Indians as an antirheumatic, were a decoction of roots used as a soak for arthritis. The Mendocino Indians used a decoction of the dried roots for colds and fevers and also to treat stomach and lung diseases. The Pomo saw it as a 'panacea plant' to treat many



Western aralia emerging in spring along a gulch in the upper Applegate.

ailments including using the roots for sores and itching sores."

Michael Moore, in his book *Medicinal Plants of the Pacific West*, states that western aralia "is an excellent tonic and soothing expectorant for people with chronic moist-lung problems." The root, aromatic and full of sticky, white oleoresin, is particularly potent, but the leaf and berry of the plant also contain many different medicinal properties. Michael Moore also says that "the cough syrup, tincture in hot water (toddy-like), or the leaf tea is a good way to recuperate from some bronchitis or the winter lung-grunge." Because western aralia is not common, only cultivated plants should be used for medicinal purposes. So please don't disturb

the wild plants.

Western aralia is useful as an ornamental garden plant, but can also be a welcome addition to a native or medicinal plant collection. According to Arthur R. Kruckeberg, author of *Gardening with Native Plants of the Pacific Northwest*, western aralia "has been a most effective and decorative plant for similar wettish habitats in Northwest gardens." Western aralia will thrive in heavy shade as long as there is some moisture and the soil does not dry out completely. Before going dormant for the winter, western aralia produces rich and creamy yellow autumn foliage, providing beautiful contrast in the garden or wild setting.

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