

## An Alpine History Mystery:

### A Native Name for a Native Shrub

December 2014

About this time of year many folks in Alpine get out the lights, ornaments, wreaths, ribbons, bows, and garlands of greenery to decorate their houses for Christmas. This tradition started centuries ago in Europe when trees and greens were gathered from the wild forests, and candles were used to brighten the holiday season. Today many people gather fresh cut natural greens or plastic reproductions from the local shopping mall, but some folks still prefer to cut their own at a local tree farm. It is also common practice to decorate with branches from holly shrubs to showcase the colorful dark green leaves and bright red berries.

Although many of the early settlers in Southern California liked the Mediterranean climate here, they found that when December rolled around they missed the holly and other forest greens that were hung in their ancestral homes. Well, being resourceful people, they set out for the wild lands to search out something that might be an acceptable substitute. What they found was a tall native shrub with saw-toothed leaves and clusters of berries that would mature to a deep red color just in time for holiday decorating. They had never seen this plant before – it grows only in California with a slight overlap with southern Oregon and northern Baja. Some folks started calling it *Christmas Berry* while others called it *Holly Berry*. Of course, botanists gave this plant the most complicated name of all: *Heteromeles Arbutifolia*. But, many centuries before the botanists, before the European settlers, and even before the missionaries set foot in California, the native Ohlone People of the California central coast gave this plant a name that is still most commonly used to identify this native plant.



These days our mystery shrub can be found in many public and private native plant gardens because in addition to being a beautiful long-lived specimen it is both water-wise and wildlife friendly. You can also find this plant growing wild in the Alpine area and in many other parts of California. But don't go searching for wild branches to cut for your holiday decorations because you would be violating a 1920's California law that prohibits cutting branches from these native shrubs.

So what do we call this holly substitute? What is the common name of this much admired native plant, given to it by the Ohlone People? That is our History Mystery for December.