

The Herb Society of America

Essential Facts for Elderberry

Sambucus spp.



American Elder

Common Name: Elderberry, Elder

Family: Adoxaceae

Latin Name: *Sambucus nigra* (European Elder), *Sambucus canadensis* (American Elder)

Growth: A multi-stemmed shrub or small tree, potentially 30 feet tall

Hardiness: Hardy from zones 3-9, depending on species. May survive in colder regions with protection

Light: Semi-shade to full sun

Soil: Prefers rich soil

Water: Moist, well-drained soil

Use: Culinary; medicinal; cosmetic; ornamental; economic [Caution – Use flowers or ripe berries (cooked) only – remove all stems because they are toxic. The leaves, stems, branches, seeds, unripe berries and roots all contain a toxic cyanide-producing glycoside.]

Propagation: Best grown from root divisions or cuttings. Can be grown (with difficulty) from seed.

History

Elderberry has a long and fascinating history and has been used by virtually every human culture. Geoffrey Grigson states that the plants were probably deposited in Europe, Asia, and North America by retreating glaciers by 9,000 B.C.E. Seeds from elderberry found in Neolithic pole-dwellings in Switzerland suggest that the plant was in cultivation by about 2000 B.C.E.

The genus name *Sambucus* (from the Greek) was selected by Carolus Linnaeus, and the plant was described by Theophrastis in *Historia Plantarum*. By the time of Pliny the Elder (77 C.E.) the medicinal properties were well known. Dioscorides, Gerard, and Culpeper included *Sambucus* in herbal writings, and, in 1644, Martin Blockwich wrote *The Anatomie of the Elder*, a book which is devoted to medicinal uses. Today, researchers are exploring the chemical bases for the medicinal benefits of elderberry (see Dr. James Duke's database, HSA website or library).

The common name "Elder" comes from an Anglo-Saxon word – *aeld* or *ellarn* – which refers to fire. The pith from inside the stem is easily removed to create a hollow tube through which air could be blown to fan a fire.

Description

Elder can be described as a rhizomatous, multi-stemmed shrub or small tree with a light gray to brown-colored bark. The dark green to deep purple-colored leaves have an unpleasant smell which is thought to act as an insect repellent. The flowers are cream-colored and appear in flat clusters. The individual florets open randomly in a flower structure called a cymose corymb. The black fruits (berries) also mature randomly. Only the nutrient-rich flowers or ripe berries (after cooking) should be consumed. While many chemical constituents have been identified, some of the common nutrients include vitamin C, vitamin A, flavonoids, beta-carotene, iron, and potassium.

While the information in this fact sheet

pertains to primarily *S. nigra* and *S. canadensis*, it must be noted that there are numerous other species. Those of particular interest to gardeners include *S. cerulea* (Blue Elderberry), a smaller, slower-growing ornamental; *S. ebulus* (European Dwarf Elderberry), a plant with very robust rhizomes from which arise usually unbranched and non-woody stems which reach 2 to 6 ft. in height and form large colonies; *S. racemosa* (Red Elderberry), a more cold tolerant species often selected as an ornamental because of its red berries and dense, erosion-preventing, root systems.

Culture and Propagation

Plant elderberry along the edge of the garden because of its potentially large size. It prefers rich soil that is moist, but well drained. Light preference is either semi-shade or full sun. Elderberry grows in many habitats. In natural settings it can be found growing along the edge of wooded areas, along stream banks, or in meadows that receive a generous supply of moisture.

Propagate elderberry from hardwood cuttings

taken in the fall or from softwood cuttings started in the spring.

It is best to sow the ripe berries in a cold frame and let nature take its course. If the berries (with tiny seeds inside) are dried before planting, they must be stratified and soaked to increase the probability of growth.

Remember to always grow cultivars from cuttings. Using seed may not produce the same plant.

Uses

Culinary:

The flowers are commonly used to make fritters by dipping the flower tops in batter and frying them until they turn golden brown. Topped with flavorful syrup, they are a wonderful treat. Elderflowers can also be made into a cordial, sparkling wine, or tea. The berries can be harvested and made into juice by simmering them in water and then straining off the juice. The juice that results can be made into syrup by adding sugar, into wine, or a delicious cordial. The berries can also be made into candy, jams, jellies, chutneys, or pies.

Medicinal:

Historically, elderberry was known as “the medicine chest of the country people” (Ettmueller) and was used to cure just about anything! Modern research suggests that elderberry has diuretic and immune system-stimulating properties and is anti-inflammatory and antiviral. Extracts from elderberries stimulate antibody production and may prove beneficial in the treatment of patients with compromised immune systems. Because elderberry is antiviral it may serve as a prophylactic agent against viruses. Preliminary studies show that elderberry extracts have neutralized the West Nile virus. The berries have also proved effective in treating viral infections such as the flu, herpes, and shingles. The diaphoretic nature of the flower is beneficial in reducing fever.

Cosmetic:

Elderflower water was applied to the skin to remove freckles and keep the complexion fair. The Romans created a hair dye made from the dark juice of the berries.

Ornamental:

Landscape designers and gardeners have become fascinated with the cultivars of elderberry. There are well over 50 cultivars (suitable for a variety of zones) from which selections can be made to enhance the landscape.



Red Elderberry



Elderberry Blossom

Economic:

Historically, the fine-grained wood, which polishes easily, was used to make combs, skewers for butchers, pegs for shoemakers, needles for weaving, musical instruments, and toys.

Parts of the elder plant (with appropriate mordants) can be used in the manufacture of dye for textiles. Colors can range from black (roots), to green (leaves), to purple or violet (berries).

Harvesting

Harvest elderberry flowers in early spring and berries from late summer into early fall (depending on growth zone). Pick only the ripe purple-to-black berries. Unripe berries are toxic and so are the red stems on the berries. Be sure to remove the stems before heating and processing the berries. Both flowers and berries can be used fresh or dried.

Bibliography

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