

# JUST FRUIT: *Elderberry*



**ELDERBERRY**

*SAMBUCUS CANADENSIS*

RECOMMENDED CULTIVARS -  
YORK, ADAMS, KENT, AND  
SCOTIA.



## Ecology



Native plant member of the Honeysuckle (Caprifoliaceae) Family  
Hardy to Zone 3

Mature height 12' Sun/shade - prefers full sun, does fine in partial sun. Plant spacing - 6 - 8' in row spacing.

Deciduous shrub with pinnately compound leaves, opposite with 3, 5-9 serrate leaflets. Once established the shrub grows quickly and suckers freely. The common name 'elder' means fire-kindler, the dry pithy stems; blue/black from the fruit color.

Elderberries also play important roles as soil erosion control, bird/wildlife habitat and forage, as well as attracting beneficial insects. The berries are eaten by rabbits, fox, and squirrels. At least 25 species of birds including indigo bunting, bluebird, catbird, brown thrasher, phoebe, turkey, and woodpeckers.

### Primary pollinator

Honeybees, numerous insects. Elderberries need 2 or more varieties to set fruit. Can also plant yarrow, queen anne's lace to attract pollinators for elderberry.

### Fruit

Tiny flowers form large, deep pink- white umbel, followed by clusters of glossy, dark purple berries in late summer.

### Soil Conditions

Prefer moist, fertile, well-drained soil with pH between 5.5 - 6.5. Tolerant to a wide range of soil texture, fertility, and acidity. It's a myth that they prefer swampy areas as they do not tolerate poor drainage.

## WHY GROW ELDERBERRY ?

A versatile, easily grown native shrub for the Midwest grower, elderberries are well positioned for the agroforestry system especially to be included in riparian and forest buffers and alley cropping systems. Elderberry fruit and flowers are edible (take note that other parts of the plant are toxic), with traditional uses including jams, syrups, and natural food colorings as well as a variety of nutraceutical uses. There are many beautiful varieties of elder, all offering frothy white to pink blossoms.



Elderberry's many attributes include: good pest and disease resistance, forage for livestock, an impressive root mass stabilizing streambanks. reducing erosion, and providing cover, food, perching, and nesting sites for many species of birds. Plant in spring before break dormancy. Because the flowers bloom in late June, frost is not an issue. Weed control is the main management issue for establishing elderberries in your orchard. Use a combination of pulling weeds by hand while they are still small, mowing and mulching to control weeds without

disturbing the elderberry roots. Once you develop a thick hedgerow of plants, elderberries can suppress weeds quite well. Second to weed management, deer browse and birds foraging berries will be your biggest management issues, and fencing and bird netting are recommended alongside a good woodchip mulch. Cane borers may cause damage, but can be held at bay with pruning out infested canes. Elderberries send up numerous canes each year with second-year canes being the most fruitful. Growers can expect an average of 10 - 15 lbs of fruit on second and third year canes. Harvest the berry clusters by hand in late August - early September. Economic potential - low input, first harvest 1 - 2 yrs. can have fresh market returns of ~ \$5.00/lb wholesale, de-stemmed and ~ \$8-\$10/lb at markets. Much potential as value-added crop for its versatile medicinal and processing uses. A pint of 100% elderberry juice can sell for \$15 - \$20.





# Elderberry - Social Benefits, Tastes, Potential Uses

Historically, considered the 'medicine chest of the common man', elderberry is regaining its footing as an important food and medicine crop due to its high nutraceutical and anti-oxidant content (higher than that of cranberries and blueberries). Your great-grandmother may have brewed elderberry tea to fight colds and fevers, while Granddad might have enjoyed a sip of elderberry wine from time to time (for medicinal purposes only, of course). The plant contains much phosphorous and potassium and the fruits high in vitamin C, vitamin A, vitamins B6, fiber and iron. Studies from the University of Michigan reveal that elderberry is both immune supportive and antimicrobial.

While Elderberry enjoys a stronghold the food and beverage market, the fruit has been recognized and exploited by the pharmaceutical and natural products industries. Elderberry has consistently been shown to reduce the severity of flu and cold symptoms as well as reduce the length of illness. Shampoos, body lotions, teas, extracts, supplements, syrups, lozenges capitalize on the health benefits

associated with elderberry fruits or flowers.

Elderberry's have a long tradition in folk medicine being used to treat ailments such as stomach ache, sinus congestion, constipation, diarrhea, sore throat, common cold and rheumatism (Novellie 2003). The plant continues to be of interest to scientists as well as herbalists to test the folksy claims and intrigue of the power of the elderberry to heal. Elderberries also enjoy a unique place in culture. The word elder derives from the Anglo-Saxon *aeld*, meaning fire, and Stone Age evidence indicates that ~10,000 years ago elder wood was used as a tinder. This incendiary heritage seems to have given birth to a true dichotomy of associations as both sacred and spiritual as well as opposing elements of necromancy. The Russians believe that elderberry drives away evil spirits, the Bohemians got to elder to take away fever, while the Sicilians think that the wood will drive away robbers and the Serbs introduce a stick of Elder into their wedding ceremonies to bring good luck (Northcote, *Book of Herbs*). Others

would nail an elder cross to a barn to protect the herd inside, while, at the same moment, countless weepy poems insisted on placing forlorn ghosts in the gloomy shade of elder trees.

*"Four hours beneath the elder-tree, she broods besidet he stream; Her dark eyes filled with mystery, Her dark soul rapt in dream."* William Sharp, "The Death Child"



*In Celtic lore, Eld was the land of fairies, and it was believed that if one sat beneath an elder tree on Midsummer's eve, one would see the miracle of the Fairy King passing.*



Elderberry also enjoys much appeal as an edible fruit crop and exhibits much potential for value-added products. The fruit can be eaten fresh, though it does harbor a slight astringent taste and eating one too many under ripe berries can be toxic. Fresh and dried berries can be found in breakfast cereals, yogurts and cream. Many prefer the distinct flavor of elderberries in pies, syrups, jams, juices, salad dressings, wine, port, cordials, beer and liquors.

For a refreshing elderberry cordial, combine, 4 C Vodka, 2 C elderberry and 1 C sugar in a gallon mason jar. Cover, shake and allow to ferment in cool, dark area, shaking repeatedly for at least a month. Pour off berries and allow to set for another 2 - 4 weeks before enjoying a nip after dinner.

## - RECIPE SAMPLER -

### Spiced elderberries -

10 C ripe elderberries, 5 C sugar, 2 tsp cinnamon, 1/2 tsp allspice, 1/2 tsp ground cloves, 1 C vinegar. Cook berries for ~20 minutes until slightly soft. Add other ingredients and heat, stir until barely thickened. When that stage is reached, pour fruit into hot, sterilized jars and seal the tops. **Dumplings:** 3/4 C flour, sifted, 1/2 tsp baking powder, 1/2 tsp cinnamon, 1/2 tsp salt, 1/4 C sugar, 1/4 C lemon peel, grated, 1/4 C milk, 1 egg. Combine dry

### Elderberry dumplings

ingredients, mix in the milk and eggs until the dough is just blended. Pour hot berry mixture in casserole and drop small spoonfuls of dumpling batter. Bake dish at 400 F for 25 - 30 min. Serve warm with ice cream: Berry mixture = 2 C elderberries, 3/4 C sugar, 1 TBSP flour, 2 TBSP lemon juice, 3/4 C water, heated gently over the stove top. Recipes provided by Faith Lasher, Mother Earth News.

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