

# Elderberry Growing Guide for Home Gardens

The following guide includes information for planting, managing, harvesting and storing elderberries for home use.

## About American elderberry (*Sambucus nigra* subsp. *canadensis*)

Known as “Nature’s Medicine Chest” American elderberry is a perennial shrub native to North America. It was an important plant to Indigenous People, early settlers, and used in American Folk medicine. Today, it is popular for its health benefits and culinary uses. An increasing number of people are growing elderberries in their home gardens to use the flowers and berries for syrups, teas, juices and more. Commercial cultivation of American elderberry is also becoming popular among smaller-scale farmers for its productivity on a limited number of acres.

Elderberry produces beautiful flowers in June with the deep, purple berries ripening from Mid-August to September. The dense root system is used to help stabilize soils in areas that are prone to soil erosion from water runoff. Elderberry produces new canes each year, making its branching growth habit useful for hedgerows or windbreaks in rural and urban landscapes.



## Health benefits and other uses from American elderberries

Elderberries could be an anchor for enhancing human health. Studies show that elderberries are full of antioxidants that can boost your immune system and reduce inflammation. It’s also known for its antiviral and antibacterial properties. These health properties of Elderberry products make it increasingly popular in health food stores and pharmacies. While its relative, the European elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) is also used in health-promoting products, research shows that American elderberry is the superior choice for healthy products such as syrups and juices. Unlike European elderberries, antioxidants in American elderberries do not break down and lose their health benefiting properties when being made into syrups and juices.

Teas, syrups, elixirs and juices are used to prevent and ease cold and flu symptoms. The berries and flowers are also used to make wonderful jams/jellies, cordials, mead, wine, baked goods and many other food uses. In combination with herbs like comfrey, elderberry leaves are also being used in salves to treat bruises and sores. The sturdy canes have a pith that can be hollowed out and used for various craft uses such as making broom handles, flutes, or whistles.

## Planting rooted elderberry cuttings

### Elderberry plantings at Columbia Center for Urban Agriculture



Elderberry cuttings are taken from the stems (or canes) of mature elderberry plants. Fresh cuttings can be directly planted in the ground. Or, as seen in the images below, fresh cuttings can be placed in containers with a potting mix where they can establish roots and then be planted in the ground. Elderberries can be grown in many different environments, but do best in sunny, well-drained fertile sites that are free of weeds. Loosen the root ball before planting to increase root contact with the soil.



While not required, berry production tends to be higher when two different cultivars (or plants with different traits) are planted near each other. Cross-pollination between the two different shrubs can improve berry production. For urban homegardens, Bob Gordon and Ranch cultivars are suitable selections as they are more tolerable of different environments and have a more compact, determinate growth.

## I. Choosing the right site to plant rooted elderberry cuttings

Elderberries grow best in full sun and in areas where their roots can stay moist (but not wet). To plant elderberries, select a location in your yard that...

- Can accommodate a plant that grows up to 8 ft tall and 4 ft wide. Space cuttings 4 ft apart if planting more than one elderberry cutting.
- Receives 6 to 8 hours of sun each day.
- Has well-drained soil that retains moisture. Water should move from the soil surface down through the soil fairly quickly. Soil can be amended if it drains too quickly or too slowly (discussed under “steps to planting rooted elderberry cuttings”).

## II. Steps to planting rooted elderberry cuttings

For elderberry plants to establish their roots, they need a weed and grass free area. Follow these steps to prepare the site for planting.

1. Once you select a site, remove grass and weeds (roots and all) from the planting area.
2. Dig a hole that is roughly 1-2 inches deeper than the height of the nursery pot. Keep the soil that has been dug out near the hole.
3. Mix the dug out soil with organic matter or other amendments if needed.
  - a. If soil is compact (dense and heavy) or has a lot of clay it might not drain well. You can improve drainage by mixing organic matter such as compost, peat moss, and shredded leaves or perlite and sand with the dug out soil.
  - b. If soil is very loose (like sand) it may drain too quickly and not retain moisture. You can add organic matter, peat moss, or compost to help retain moisture with the dug out soil.
4. Take the elderberry cutting out of the container and loosen the root ball. Loosening the root ball ensures more of the plant roots spread out into the soil.
5. Place the elderberry plant in the hole so that the base of the stem is even with the ground level or just slightly below ground level. Refill the dug out soil from steps 2 and 3 back into the hole. Gently tamp down the soil around the plant to ensure the soil is in contact with the roots.
6. Thoroughly water the new planting. After the water has drained through the soil, spread mulch around the base of the plant. This will help the soil retain moisture and minimize weeds.
7. It's important the soil does not dry out. Water once a week. More waterings may be necessary during dry spells.

## Planting recap with photos

1. Choose a well-drained, sunny site to plant elderberry cuttings
2. If planting more than one elderberry cutting, space them 4 ft apart
3. Mix soil with compost to add nutrients, retain moisture, and improve drainage
4. Keep the planting area free of weeds and grass
5. Water at least once a week and more if necessary during dry spells

**Step 1 Site Selection: sunny, well-drained, weed-free area**



**Step 2 Dig hole that is roughly 1-2 inches deeper than root ball**



**Step 3 Gently loosen the root ball to expose more roots to the soil**



**Step 4 Place cutting in hole. Spread out roots to contact soil**



**Step 5 Fill the hole in with soil. Root ball should be covered.**



**Step 6 Water thoroughly and cover with mulch or straw**

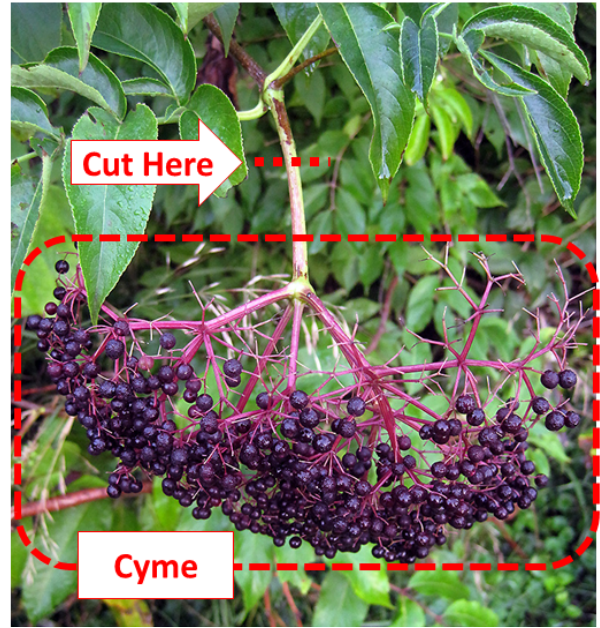


## Harvesting and destemming elderberries

**First year after planting:** elderflowers should be harvested when blossoms are fully opened. Harvesting elderflowers focuses energy on building a strong root system.

**Second year:** elderberries will be ready for a small harvest. You can use scissors or pruners to cut the stems the berry clusters (i.e. cymes) are growing on (see image to the right).

**Third and fourth year:** elderberry plants will be entering full production and you can expect a considerable increase in yields. Yields can be variable due to planting site conditions and location.



1. Elderberries are ready to harvest in late summer. Harvest when all berries are deep purple on the cyme.
  - a. Elderberries are highly perishable. Harvest during cooler parts of the day.
  - b. Use scissors or pruners to cut the stems of the cymes.
  - c. Refrigerate harvested berries at 32-40 degrees F immediately after harvesting. If you are not going to process elderberries within a couple days, freeze the harvested cymes in freezer bags or containers. Elderberries can be frozen for a few months.
2. Destemming and storage of elderberries
  - a. To separate fresh berries from the cymes, you can gently comb your fingers through the cymes to remove berries, but be careful as the berries are fragile. If you use this method, wash the berries under water after removing berries from cymes to remove any insects or debris. You can also submerge the berries in water to remove any floating berries, stems, or other debris. Lay the berries out on a dish towel and dry the berries off completely, then store them in the freezer in freezer bags or containers if not processed within a couple days.
  - b. To separate frozen berries from the cymes, use your hands to comb the berries from the cyme. You could also try using a wide-toothed comb. Once the berries are separated from the cyme, wash them thoroughly and prepare for immediate processing.



## EASY RECIPE FOR SYRUP FROM RIVER HILLS HARVEST

NO BOIL

OUR FAVORITE RECIPE WE HAVE FOUND YET

# SLOW COOKER ELDERBERRY SYRUP

In a crockpot, combine: 1 and 1/3 cups dried American elderberries, 1 tablespoon cinnamon, 4 tablespoons fresh ginger, 7 cups water.

Keep crockpot on low heat for 4 to 6 hours (or longer depending on the taste you like).

Strain the mixture and once cooled, add your 1 cup of honey.

Keep your finished syrup in the fridge and consume within 2 to 3 weeks or freeze.

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