

Master Gardener Corner: Growing elderberry

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Chances are you won't see elderberries in the produce aisle of your local grocery store. They are difficult to transport because the fruits fall off the cluster during shipping. Traditionally elderberry fruit has been harvested from the wild or a backyard patch. Sometimes called the American elder, the elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*) plant is a woody perennial and native to North America. (*Sambucus nigra* is the elderberry native to Europe.) The dark purple fruit can be used to make tea, wine, baked goods, jam and jelly. *Sambucus canadensis* is hardy to zone 3. In addition to being grown for their fruit they can also be used in landscape plantings.



Do not confuse *S. canadensis* with red elderberry (*Sambucus racemosa*). Another native, it grows wild throughout most of the United States and Canada. The red berries are said to be unpalatable when raw and possibly toxic for some people, but birds and small mammals can eat them. Be aware that some of the ornamental elderberries are of this species.

In many cultures elderberry has been used as a medicinal herb. The berries are rich in vitamin C and A plus phosphorous, potassium and iron. Its antiviral properties can reduce the severity and duration of colds and flu. Elderberry leaves, stems, seeds, roots and unripe berries contain small amounts of hydrocyanic acid. When eaten by people it is converted into cyanide. When the berries are cooked, cool processed or fermented these compounds are neutralized. Compound levels vary by species and levels in *S. canadensis* seem not to be very high. To be safe, pick out the stems, leaves and green berries when cleaning flowers or berries for consumption.

Unlike other fruits, elderberries are not usually threatened by a spring frost as they flower in late June. Flower clusters range in size from 3 to 10 inches in diameter. There is some debate about whether the elderberry is self-fertile or not. Wild elderberries don't seem to have a problem bearing fruit, but if you are growing them in your backyard the recommendation is to plant at least two different cultivars within 60 feet of each other. Elderberry flowers appear to be primarily wind-pollinated so cross-pollination will help increase fruit production.

Wild elderberries will grow along forest edges and in partial sun but they yield best when grown in full sun. Elderberries will tolerate a wide range of soil textures and fertility. For best results plant in well-drained, moderately acidic soils (pH 5.5 to 6.5). Plants will not do well in areas with poor drainage. Young plants do not compete well with weeds or other aggressive plants.

There are several cultivated varieties that you can choose from. Some of the traits to consider when selecting what to plant include: bush size at maturity, flower cluster and berry size, when the fruit ripens

and how uniformly the clusters ripen.

Planting can be done in either the fall or spring, but spring planting has the best success rate. Space plants 6 to 10 feet apart. Elderberries are shallow rooted, so keep them well watered during the first growing season. Plants need one to two inches of water per week. Mulching around plants will help reduce competition from weeds. Mulch to about 4-inches deep with wood chips and remove weeds that come up until the canopy forms. After the first year avoid disturbing the soil as the fibrous root system and new canes can be damaged.



American black elderberry (*Sambucus nigra* ssp. *canadensis*)

Source: Larry Trekell, Bugwood.org

Elderberries send up many new canes each year. The canes usually reach full height in one season and develop lateral branches in the second. Flowers and fruit develop on the tips of the current season's growth. Second-year elderberry canes with good lateral development are the most fruitful. In the third or fourth year, older canes tend to lose vigor and become weak.

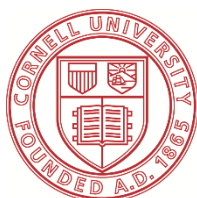
New plantings should be encouraged to grow vigorously during the first two seasons. After the second year, pruning should be done annually in late winter to early spring while the plants are dormant. Remove all dead, broken, or weak canes. Leave an equal number of one-, two-, and three-year-old canes. Removing older canes will encourage new, more

fruitful canes to grow. Each bush should have 6 to 10 canes total.

Elderberry fruits mature between mid-August and mid-September depending on the cultivar. They turn a dark purple when fully ripe. The easiest way to harvest elderberries is to use scissors. Snip the entire cluster from the shrub and then strip the berries from the cluster. Use the fruit as soon as possible or keep it at a cool temperature for later use.

In the home garden birds can be a problem as they love the fruit. Deer can also be a problem in the winter as they will eat the cane tips. Spotted wing drosophila, an invasive fruit fly, is becoming a concern as it lays eggs in the fruit. Tomato ringspot virus is among the most serious diseases affecting elderberries. Make sure to buy certified virus free plants. Powdery mildew can be a problem in some years, especially when it affects the fruit. Cane borers occasionally cause damage. Root rot can be an issue in poorly drained soils. Proper siting, pruning and sanitation practices will help keep your plantings disease free.

Resources: University of Maine Extension, Cornell University, Stark Brothers, Penn State, and Ontario Ministry of Agriculture.



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