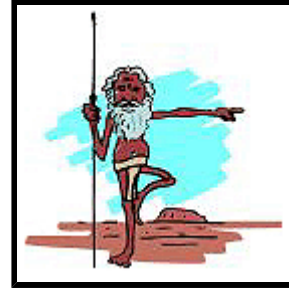


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Common Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*)



From *Identifying and Harvesting
Edible and Medicinal Plants
in Wild (and Not So Wild) Places*



Common Elderberry in Flower with Immature Berries

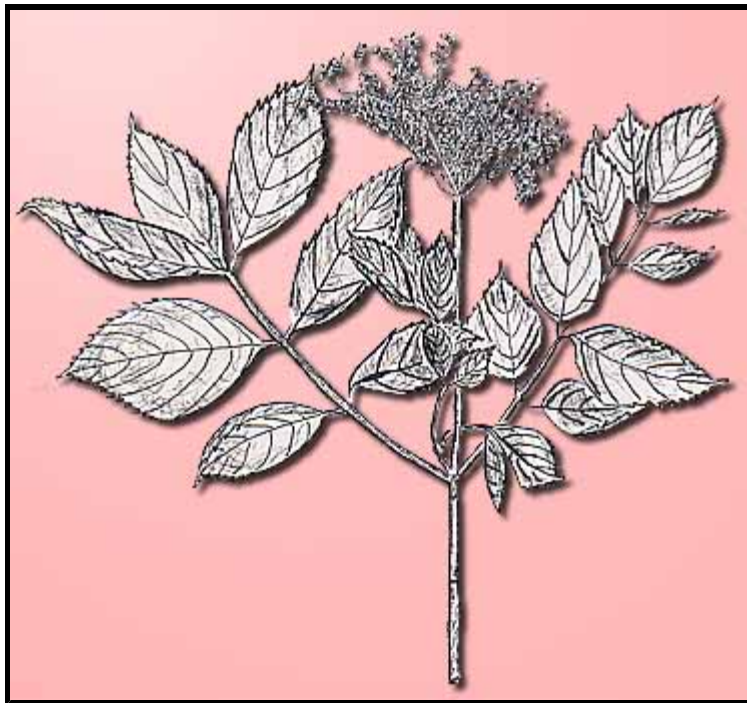
Note the loose cluster of flowers and berries configured like an umbrella.

This member of the honeysuckle family is a shrub that grows up to thirteen feet

high, with smooth, gray bark. Corky bumps cover the slender branches, and thereís a spongy, white pith inside the twigs and branches.

The opposite, feather-compound leaves may be over three feet long. The leaf is divided into 5-11 opposite, coarsely toothed, pointed, short-stalked elliptical leaflets, each 3-4" long.

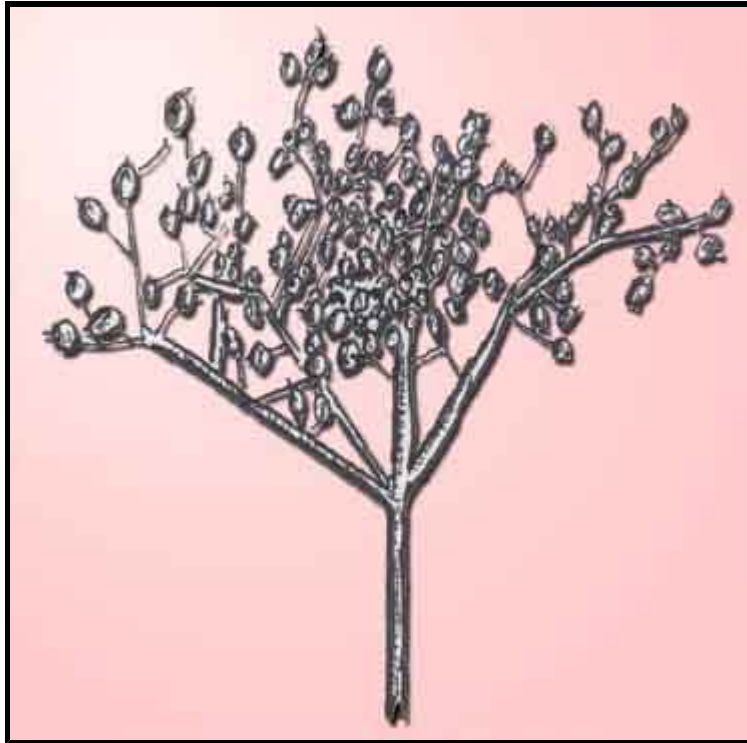
In late spring or early summer, the elder bears tiny, branched, white, lacy flowers in flat-topped to slightly rounded clusters (panicles) that spread over 6" across.



Common Elderberry in Flower

Note the paired feather-compound leaves divided into segments called leaflets. The finely toothed (serrated) leaflets are oval, with pointed tips.

The tiny, spherical, juicy, purple-black to black, seedy berries are hardly more than 1/8" across. They grow in branched clusters, like the flowers, ripening from mid-summer to early fall, in quantities that weigh down the branches.



Common Elderberry Fruit Cluster

The tiny, black, globular berries grow on branching, umbrella-like clusters.

The blue elder (*Sambucus cerulea*) has dark blue to blackish berries, and grows in the western 1/3 of the United States. It is very similar to the common elderberry, and you can use it the same way.

Avoid elderberries species with red fruit growing in rounded, instead of flat clusters. They may make you sick. Hercules club is a shrub or small tree with feather-compound leaves that looks a little like the common elderberry. It has flat clusters of poisonous, black berries, often arranged in a ring, and a short, unbranched, thorny trunk. Elderberries are thornless.

The common elderberry often grows in large, dense stands in moist places. Look for it in marshes, along riverbanks, along roadsides, and in moist woods and thickets in eastern North America and the West Indies.

Collect the flowers by plucking off the stalk at the cluster's base. It is impossible to remove each tiny flower individually. Take a small proportion of the flowers from each bush, and collect only where they are abundant or the plant won't produce any berries. Where you find one elder bush, you usually find many more.



Common Elderberry in Flower

Note that the leaves are compound (divided into segments), and opposite (there's a pair of these compound leaves).

The flowers make wonderful food. Try elder flower (sometimes called elderblow) fritters using your favorite tempura or pancake batter. Make a light, mild batter, so you don't overpower the delicate flowers. Try sautéing them.

Elder flowers make a pleasant tasting tea, especially with mint. They also make a potent, fragrant wine. Steeped in vinegar they add flavor and strengthen the stomach.



Common Elderberry Flowers

Each radially symmetrical flower has 5 flattened, white petals and five protruding stamens (male parts).

Taste some berries from a few bushes before you collect, so you can choose the bushes with the tastiest fruit.



Common Elderberry Fruit Cluster

Each cluster bears very many tiny, globular, black berries.

Gather the berries like the flowers. This is quick. The real work occurs at home: Pulling small bunches of berries from their stems, and sorting the fruit from the debris on a tray, takes time

Avoid unripe, green berries—they'll get you sick. Even raw ripe elderberries make some people nauseous. Cooking or drying dispels the offending substance, and greatly improves the flavor. Baking this fruit in muffins, cakes and breads imbues them with a piquant crunchiness. They become the central ingredient whenever you use them in baked goods. Elderberries aren't sweet and contain no thickeners. Rely on other ingredients for these elements, especially if you're making the European favorite, elderberry jam.



Common Elderberry Fruit

The scar at the tip of each berry marks the spot where the petals had been growing on the flower. Note the branched, purple fruit stalks.

The berries have few calories and lots of nutrition. They provide very large amounts of potassium and beta-carotene, as well as sugar and fruit acids, calcium, phosphorous and vitamin C.

Looking at or even thinking about the elderberry bush evokes a flood of magical associations and images of the past—European ladies dousing their white skin with elder flower water, and crystal goblets filled with elderberry wine. In European folklore, fairies and elves would appear if you sat underneath an elder bush on midsummer night. The lovely elder possessed potent magic, with the ability to drive away witches, and kill serpents. Carrying the twigs in your pocket was a charm against certain diseases. One of these tales bears some truth: Sleeping under the elder supposedly produces a drugged, dream-filled sleep—the fragrance is actually a mildly sedative. Perhaps the visions of fairies and elves resulted from dreaming under an elder bush.

My experience with the elder indicates that much of its charmed reputation

among Europeans and Native Americans comes from its ability to heal. The flowers and fruit are medicinal. Hippocrates already recognized this in 400 B.C. (He used a smaller European species with similar properties, that doesn't grow in America.)

Due to their diuretic and detoxifying properties, people eat elderberries to lose weight. The flowers have been used in cosmetics since ancient times. Distilled elder flower water softens, tone and restores the skin. Elder flower infusion cleanses the skin, lightens freckles, and soothes sunburn. Its Bioflavonoids promote circulation and strengthen the capillaries.



Common Elderberry Flower Head

Note how all the flowers are open, and none has yellowed yet. This is the best time to harvest them, and when they're the most fragrant.

An infusion or tincture is astringent, expectorant and diaphoretic, great mixed with yarrow and peppermint for colds, flu, and asthma. Herbalists also use it to soothe children's upset stomachs and relieve gas. It's even applied externally for swelling, rashes, and chilblains (frostbite-like trauma to wet skin), and as an eyewash for conjunctivitis and eye inflammation. You can even steep the flowers in oil to make a soothing massage lotion that relaxes sore muscles, and also soothes burns and rashes. Like the flowers, elderberry infusion is astringent and diaphoretic—good for colds, excessive mucus, and sore throat. You can also boil them in vinegar to make a black hair dye.

In 1899, an American sailor accidentally discovered that cheap port wine, which is colored with elderberries, relieved his arthritis. Other port wines didn't work. I don't recommend drinking alcohol, which causes more problems than it helps, but this result indicates elderberries' possible anti-arthritic properties. Another use for the wine goes back to the movie: "Arsenic and Old Lace." Two

old ladies laced it with arsenic to put lonely old men out of their misery!

Many older herb books recommend using elderberry leaves, roots, or bark medicinally, probably because Indian herbal experts used them. This doesn't guarantee safety: Never use these parts of the elderberry. They're poisonous. They contain a bitter alkaloid and glycoside that may change into cyanide. Children have been poisoned using elderberry twig peashooters, and adults have been poisoned using hollowed twigs to tap maple trees. However, there is a benefit to the toxicity: People use dried, crumbled elderberry leaves in their gardens as a natural insecticide.

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