



ELDERBERRY (SAMBUCUS SPP.)

SHRUB FACTS

Elder is a somewhat sprawling, **deciduous berry-producing shrub with species native to both North America (*Sambucus canadensis*) and Europe (*Sambucus nigra*)**. It thrives in many different types of soil and is often found in moist forest clearings, field edges, and along streams, ditches and roadsides. In fact, elder is an early colonizer of derelict land and this makes it a good pioneer species for re-establishing woodlands. The shrubs generally grow **8-15 feet tall** and feature pinnate leaves with 3-7 leaflets up to 5" long. **Late spring and early summer** are the best for noticing these plants, when big, umbrella-shaped clusters of tiny white or ivory blossoms contrast dramatically with surrounding foliage. The **hermaphrodite (both female and male) flowers** tend to have a strong, musky smell, and attract many different pollinating insects. Though the leaves and stems are toxic to humans, **elderberry blossoms are edible** and are often used in jams, wine, and herbal teas. However, the real star of the show are the **dark purple or black berries that ripen in late summer and early autumn**.

SEASONAL CARE

Elderberries are tolerant of some shade but produce best in full sun; they are also not fussy about soil, but prefer **slightly acidic soil** that is **high in organic matter** and stays consistently moist. Shrubs generally start producing within 1-4 years and are more productive when they are **cross-pollinated** with another variety, so consider planting multiple varieties in your garden. Elderberries sometimes re-bloom later in the growing season, providing the bees in your orchard with an ongoing source of food!

WINTER: Upon reaching their 3rd year, elderberries should be pruned every year in late winter or early spring. Remove any diseased or damaged wood and any growth older than two years to encourage younger, more productive canes.

SPRING: Remember to fertilize the soil with compost and to mulch around the plants with hay, straw, or bark chips to control weeds that compete for water and nutrients.

SUMMER/FALL: When it's time to harvest the berries in late summer through early fall, shake the berries loose or harvest the clusters by cutting the stem just above the fruit. Make sure you leave enough for the birds!

NUTRITIONAL BENEFITS

Elderberries are often known as "food for the birds" because of all the feathery creatures they attract, but don't let that make you overlook the **many culinary and medicinal uses** of this superfood! The berries are not generally eaten fresh (and in fact, can be poisonous in large quantities) but usually dried or cooked into delicious jams, preserves, pies, and so forth. As a medicinal plant, the Roma community of Europe reportedly called it "**the most healing tree on earth**," and Native Americans used elderberry to treat **rheumatism, sciatica, coughs and other conditions**. Elderberries have high levels of anthocyanins and vitamin C, and simply boiling the berries down is a great way to create a yearlong supply of an immune-system-boosting syrup. Elder flowers are also edible!

PROPAGATION

Elderberries are easy to propagate, both from seed and from cuttings. To start your own elder shrub from seed, pick your own cluster of elderberry fruits and hang them upside down in the sun to dry. Then, shake the seeds loose from the dehydrated fruit pulp and put them in a bag in the refrigerator for 8 to 12 weeks to stratify them (seeds need to be exposed to cold and moisture before being able to germinate).

