

Elderberry

Sambucas canadensis

Cultivation Guide

Elderberries are hardy, native shrubs that have great ornamental and fruiting value. They produce beautiful, large, white flower heads in the spring that are followed by large clusters of blue-black berries in late summer. Elderberry fruit makes incredible juice, wine, jam, syrup, pies and jellies that have wonderful flavor and are very high in Vitamin C; the flower clusters can be dipped in batter and fried.



Elderberries are edible when cooked.



Uncooked berries have a dark purple juice that can be astringent and inedible. All parts of the elderberry plant are considered to be valuable in many folk medicine traditions. To the Native Americans and American settlers, it was considered "**the medicine chest of the common people**". Elderberries can be used to suppress: coughs, colds, flu, headaches, burns and bacterial and viral infections. They improve vision and heart health and serve as an immune system booster. Poultices made from leaves and flowers are good for wounds, sprains and bruises.

Elderberries are an important source of summer food for over 50 species of songbirds, including the indigo bunting, yellow-shafted flicker, ruby-crowned kinglet, mockingbird, robin and cedar waxwing.

VARIETY SELECTION

Elderberries fruit more heavily when two different varieties are planted close together. Elderberry varieties vary in berry earliness, yield, hardiness, plant growth and disease susceptibility. Berry flavor and cluster size can also vary between cultivars. Choose several different varieties and see how they do for you and your growing conditions.

SITE SELECTION

Elderberries do well in sun or part shade and prefer moist, well-drained soil. Poor growth results when planted in areas that tend to have dry soil, especially during summer heat or during drought conditions.



PLANTING RECOMMENDATIONS

Elderberry plants are easy to propagate from cuttings in the spring. Place cuttings in containers with potting soil mixed with several handfuls of well decomposed compost. Cutting “sticks” can be spaced 2-3 inches apart. Place in direct light in a warm area until several sets of healthy leaves form; transplant to outdoor locations. Elderberries are shallow rooted, so keep them well-watered during the first season. Cuttings can also be placed in water until roots form; transplant outdoors and make sure to keep well watered.

When planting outdoors, space plants 6’ to 10’ apart. Control weeds around young plants by mulching. Cardboard boxes (with tape and staples removed) are an excellent source of weed barrier. Place cardboard around the base of your plant and cover with leaves, straw or grass clippings to keep boxes from blowing away and to help retain moisture.

Elderberries send up new canes each year that usually reach full height in one season. Flowers and fruit develop on the tips of the current season’s growth. The easiest way to maintain your elderberries is to cut them back to the ground at the end of each growing season. Healthy plants will regenerate new canes in the spring.

Harvest elderberry fruit in late August through early September, depending on the cultivar. When ripe, the entire cluster should be removed and the berries stripped from the cluster for use.

PEST MANAGEMENT

Relatively few insects and diseases are problematic to elderberries. Potential pests include caterpillars, mites, cane borers, sawfly larvae, aphids and fall webworms. Diseases such as viruses, cankers, leaf spot and powdery mildew may attack elderberry. Good cultural growing practices can minimize these damages; feed the soil well decomposed organic matter; compost encourage healthy plant growth. Birds can be a serious problem which may require netting to protect. Mockingbirds, in particular, are very smart and can find the smallest holes in bird netting.

Sources of Information and Propagation Material:

- www.elderberrylife.com
- www.coltsfootwinery.com
- elderberries.ning.com
- <http://www.fruit.cornell.edu/mfruit/elderberries.html>

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