



# Elderberry

*Sambucus nigra* L. ssp. *cerulea* (Raf.) Bolli; *Sambucus nigra* L. ssp. *canadensis* (L.) Bolli

Adoxaceae

## Species description

Elderberries are large, deciduous suckering shrubs or small trees with dark to bright green, drooping, pinnately compound leaves. Each leaf is composed on five to nine leaflets. Numerous small, white, perfect umbel-like or panicle flower clusters appear from shoots near apical buds in early spring. The fruit mature in clusters of sweet, dark blue berries. The flowers and berries are edible, but other parts of the plant may be toxic. Elderberry shrubs may grow 10-30 feet tall and about 10 feet in diameter.



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## Natural and cultural history

American elderberry species grow from west Texas north to Montana, western Alberta, and southern British Columbia, all other western states, and south into northwest Mexico. There are also European and Asian species of elderberry. The large shrubs grow in humid or riparian, well-drained sunny sites, usually occurring in openings in forest habitats of slopes, canyons, cliff bases, streamsides, and stream banks, and moist areas within drier, more open habitats. Indigenous peoples across North America prize elderberry fruit. The small clusters of berries are gathered in large quantities throughout July and August. These clusters are dried for winter use, or cooked into rich sauces. Elderberry was so greatly enjoyed that families would live for weeks on little else. Fruit are collected from the wild across its range in parts of the U.S., Canada and Mexico, and commercially cultivated in Oregon.

## Planting considerations and propagation techniques

Elderberry shrubs prefer moist, well-drained, open and sunny sites but can also be grown in partial shade. The shrub prefers moist, rich, well-drained soils. Elderberry attracts beneficial insects, and provides food and shelter for wildlife, especially birds. The shrub is a vigorous, pioneer species, and is often used as a windbreak or living fence. Different elderberry species can be grown from 10 feet to almost 10,000 feet in elevation. Elderberry shrubs are cross-pollinated and require another plant or variety to be grown nearby.

Elderberries grows best from seed. The fruits may be collected when ripe and spread in thin layers to dry. To separate seeds from fruits either 1) run fruit through a macerator with water, the pulp and empty



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seeds float; 2) crush, dry and use without separating fruits and seeds; and 3) clean small amounts of fruit in a fruit blender. Elderberry seed can be stored dry at 41 °F for several years. Elderberry seeds can be sown in the fall soon after collection, or stratified and sown in the spring. Without pretreatment, seed germination may be delayed from 2 to 5 years after planting.

Cuttings of elderberry have lower survival success seed establishment. Use hardwood cuttings from previous seasons growth. Take cuttings from older wood, so inner pith is not exposed. Cuttings should be at least 10", and have at least two nodes. Cuttings should be placed in 4" pots with perlite and peat. Plants should be kept moist. Cuttings have a fragile root system, with high mortality occurring when transplanted.

## Water needs

Elderberry trees require about an inch of water per week, and they are moderately drought tolerant once established.

## Care

Do not prune elderberry for the first two years. After that, trees may be pruned back in early spring and the dead branches removed to stimulate new, productive growth.

## Harvesting and processing

Blue or purple berries are gathered and made into elderberry wine, jam, syrup, sauces and pies. The berries can be harvested in late summer (August-September) and made into juice by simmering them in water and then straining off the juice. The juice that results can be made into syrup by adding sugar, into wine, or a delicious cordial. Flower tops can also be harvested in early summer when shedding pollen, and dipped in batter and fried like pancakes. Petals can be eaten raw or made into a fragrant and tasty tea. Caution should be used to collect only ripe berries and try to remove stems and seeds, which contain a toxic, cyanide-producing glycoside.

## References and resources

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