

Elderberries

Sambucus

A Garden Guide

Elderberries (*Sambucus*) are tough, durable plants, prized by herbalists for their flowers and berries. Elderberries grown for edible and medicinal purposes in this part of the world are our native *Sambucus canadensis*, although there are many other types of *Sambucus* native to temperate regions of the world. These fast growing plants are excellent for slope stabilization and as hedges. The berries are beloved by birds. They have a long cultural history. In Europe there are many fascinating myths about them.



Pollination: Requires two different types for pollination.

Siting: Elderberries are tolerant of many conditions. They will produce best in 6-8 hours of direct sunlight. They can tolerate clay, slopes, and part shade. Space 6-10' apart at a minimum, 30' maximum.

Soil and Planting: Elderberries prefer a pH of 5.5-6.5, with moist, well-draining soil. Usually in our soils, they will need at least 1/3rd soil conditioner, up to 1/3rd rich composts, mixed with our native clay. Gently applying mycorrhizae directly to the roots, just prior to planting, will improve tree resilience. Dig a hole 2-3x as wide as the pot, only as deep as the pot, plant the tree in the soil at the same height as it was in the pot. Apply 2-3" of mulch to the root zone, do not let it touch the trunk or any woody roots that might be visible.

Fertilizing: Many options, Espoma® Tree-tone or Happy Frog® Fruit & Flower applied in the spring are excellent choices. Compost tea is a wonderful snack for your trees in the spring and summer, as is Neptune's Harvest Seaweed Plant Food (Kelp).

Watering: Slowly, deeply, and once weekly during the first growing season. Supplemental water will be needed during dry periods - drought can compromise fruit production. Less water will be needed during rainy periods. Remember, too much or too little water can cause significant health issues.

Organic Spray Schedule: Elderberries have very few significant disease and pest issues. Horticultural or Neem Oil are good options to consider, if issues arise.

Wildlife: Wildlife, particularly birds, may be attracted to the berries. When berries are nearly ripe (deep purple - almost black), check them frequently. You can plant enough that there's plenty to share. Alternatively, we do carry netting.

Harvesting: It may take a few years before there's significant flower and berry production. Be mindful that **the flowers and berries require processing to be safe - the rest of the plant is toxic. Do not eat raw elderberries.** Some people may also have allergic reactions to this plant.



Flowers can be harvested when all the flowers on the umbel have bloomed. It is best to harvest in the morning, transporting your harvest in a mesh, breathable bag. **Stems are not edible** and must be removed prior to consumption, but they can be useful if drying the flowers upside down. Use flowers **fresh**, or **dry** for a few days (upside down or on a screen) and store in a paper bag. There are many recipes online for how to use the flowers, including elderflower tea and elderflower syrup. Remember that if you harvest all the flowers, the plant will not develop berries later in the season.

Berries can be harvested when they are purple-black, and slightly soft. The heavy berries will cause the umbel to droop down, and ripe ones will easily fall off the stem. Large bowls are helpful for harvesting. As with the flowers, the stems must be removed - forks can aid in this process. Post harvest, wash the berries off in water. Skim off any berries that float to the top (they are unripe) and any debris. Repeat as needed until berries are clean, air dry, and then use or freeze until needed. Berries do not keep for long so need to be used or frozen ASAP. There are many recipes online for many ways to use elderberries - syrups, wines, jams, jellies, pies, dried, tinctures, infused in honey, and many many more.



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