

Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*)



Useful Plants
NURSERY

Exposure: Full sun to part shade, zone 4-7.

Soil: Moist, average to rich soils. Elderberries thrive on ample amounts of water and good fertile soils.

Growth habits: Vigorous, extremely hardy, multiple-stem shrubs or small trees reaching 10 to 12 feet at maturity. Stems are brittle and relatively short lived. Plant at least two different varieties for cross pollination.

Landscape uses: A great companion plant that provides shade and habitat for many other plants. Beautiful large clusters of ivory white flowers in early summer, followed by heavy clusters of black berries in late summer or early fall.

Edible/Medicinal properties: Distinct potent flavor and profound antiviral properties that can reduce the duration of colds and flu, even having prophylactic effects against viral organisms. Elderberries may be our first line of defense and protection from pandemic flu epidemics. Many natural cough syrups use elderberry syrups as their base. Makes delicious wines, meads, and jams.

Pollination: Two varieties are needed for pollination. They are pollinated by bees and native pollinators.

Caring for your elderberry plants

Pruning: An established elderberry plant sends up new branches from the ground each year. As the plant ages, remove old branches from the center to provide more light into the middle of the shrub. Elderberries flower on the current season's growth, so you can cut them to the ground in winter to control their size and still get a harvest the following year. They seem to fruit best the second year after a heavy pruning, so for good annual production, cycle through heavy pruning of each plant or part of each plant every 2-3 years.

Watering: The elderberry will likely need to be watered deeply once a week if there isn't enough rain.

Fertilization: Elderberry plants are heavy feeders. Apply a layer of manure in early winter. Apply compost in the spring and apply a good organic fertilizer as needed.

Frequently asked questions about elderberries

Are elderberries bothered by insects?

Some insects eat the elderberry leaves, but they don't usually kill an established plant. We've also seen borers in the stems.

My elderberry has droopy leaves. Why is that?

Droopy leaves are a sign of stress. The most common cause of stress for elderberries is from under watering. Stress can also be caused by pests damaging the roots and stems or from fungal diseases. Elderberries' vigor tends to minimize their insect and disease problems.

My elderberry was mowed down. Will it grow back?

An elderberry plant with established roots will probably grow back. Establishing the root system takes a couple years, so it pays to give it some protection from damage when it's newly planted.

If it is mowed down, fertilize it well with a good organic fertilizer and water the fertilizer in. Give it a few months during the growing season to see if it will make a comeback.

My elderberry plant has flowers but doesn't get fruit. What's up with that?

The most likely cause is that elderberries require two different varieties for pollination. Also, all plants require phosphate to fruit. Our Southeastern soils are depleted of phosphate. Phosphate moves slowly through the soil. To get the phosphate to the plant roots, use a piece of rebar or sturdy screwdriver to create a small hole into the root zone, and then fill it with a mixture of compost and phosphate.

How do you prepare the elderberries?

Debbie makes and cans elderberry juice to have for a cold or before a trip. We have friends who make elderberry syrups, wine, and mead, and even elderberry flower champagne! Elderberries are also good in jam for a daily immune system boost.

Additional information

See the Useful Plants Nursery website at www.usefulplants.org for videos demonstrating planting and other plant care techniques.