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Elderberries: Easy to grow

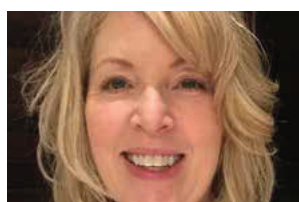
Question: I've heard the flowers and berries of elderberry plants can be used in pies, syrups, juices, wines and jellies. Can you tell me more about elderberries and how to grow them in our area?

Answer: Elderberry, also known as *Sambucus*, has been popular in gardens for generations. Desired for its edible and medicinal properties, this large deciduous shrub is native to many parts of North America. Often referred to as Elders, they produce big, beautiful clusters of flowers and bright berries, and are valued not only by humans, but also by birds, butterflies and other pollinators.

Elderberries are quite versatile, productive and easy to grow. In their natural state they are fast growing and can be a bit wild looking, although with pruning they can be tamed. In big gardens they make effective screens or windbreaks, yet in any size garden they make a lovely specimen plant.

Elders prefer a location with full sun to part shade and well-draining, loamy soil, yet they are also quite tolerant of poor quality or overly wet soil.

When growing elderberries, let them grow wildly without pruning or picking the berries during the first couple years. By the third year they will be mature and you can trim them



Carol Dalu
Ask a Master Gardener

back and remove any dead areas. This will encourage the shrub to produce more berries. To increase fruit production, it can be helpful to have more than one shrub to allow for cross pollination.

When planting, allow plenty of space between them as they can get quite large. Flowers appear in spring for a few weeks followed by berries in late summer. Because birds also enjoy the berries, pick them quickly before they eat them all, or cover the shrub with netting to protect the fruit.

The flowers and the berries of the elderberry shrub have been used for many generations for both food and medicinal purposes. Cooked berries of most species are edible, however raw berries and other parts of the plants can be poisonous causing digestive discomfort if ingested.

In Europe elderflower syrup is quite popular, commonly made from an extract of the elderflower blossoms, which is added to pastries, or diluted with water and used as a drink

or food flavoring. The flowers of *Sambucus nigra* are used to produce an elderflower cordial, and the French liqueur, St. Germain, is made from elderflowers. Berries of several varieties are commonly used to make fruit pies, jellies and relishes, and in natural food retailers you will often find *Sambucus* or elderberry products sold for medicinal purposes.

Popular varieties include:

■ *Sambucus canadensis* (American Elderberry), native to North America, it produces white flowers and large clusters or dark purple fruit. Fruit and flowers are used for wines and the fruit for pies. Popular cultivars include "Adams" and "Johns".

■ *Sambucus Mexicana* (Blue Elderberry), native from California to British Columbia and east to the Rockies. A very large shrub or tree, it produces creamy white flowers followed by very blue to black berries used in jams, jellies, pies and wine. Can be drought tolerant, but looks better with moderate water.

■ *Sambucus nigra* (European Elder or Black Elder), similar to *S. canadensis*, but larger, bearing early-summer flower clusters. There are over 30 cultivars offering foliage that is golden, variegated ("Albo-variegated", "Madonna", "Pulverulenta") or purple ("Black Beauty", "Black Lace",

"Guincho Purple", "Thundercloud"). Purple plants produce varying shades of pink flowers.

■ *Sambucus racemosa* (Red Elderberry), native to northern regions of North America, Europe and Asia, it produces bright cherry-red fruit on light green foliage. Its showy flowers and berries are popular with birds, butterflies and other pollinators. Prefers moist locations, stream banks or open forests.

Depending on the variety, harvest berries from August to September. Allow to ripen on the shrub to a dark purple, then cut off the entire cluster and strip the berries into a bowl.

Keep refrigerated and process as soon as possible. Expect 12-15 pounds fruit from a mature plant (3-4 years old).

Again, the uncooked berries are astringent and inedible, but when processed they have a sweet, earthy flavor.

Whether you harvest the fruit and flowers of the elderberry plant or leave them for the birds and pollinators to enjoy, the plant makes an attractive addition to any garden.

Do you have a gardening question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners via email at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, by phone at 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.