

Enchanted Elderberry, or Have Respect for Your Elders!

Elderberries have been blooming along roadsides. Their blossoms spread across the bushes like white lace doilies. Do you remember infamous poison-laced elderberry wine that was used to put lonely gentlemen out of their misery by little old ladies in the comedy, "Arsenic and Old Lace"? Did "old lace" refer to the ladies, the "laced" wine, or the appearance of elderberry blossoms? Who knows?

Image 1: A nice colony blooming several years ago off Gilgal Road in Abbeville County.



Many tiny white flowers form a large more or less flat-topped blossom known botanically as a cyme. Each flower is "complete" with five sepals, five petals, five stamens that produce pollen, and one pistil that produces eggs and seed. And as complete flowers they are also "perfect" because both male and female parts are present. Incomplete flowers lacking sepals or petals can still be perfect as long as both male and female structures are present!

Image 2: One cluster of flowers, a cyme.



Image 3: Individual flowers. Can you count petals and stamens?



By summer's end bushes will be in fruit, and, botanically speaking each fruit is a drupe! Other familiar examples of drupes are cherries, peaches, and olives, fruits that have a single seed surrounded by the fleshy part that developed from the flower's ovary.

Image 4: Beautiful juicy ripe drupes ready for pie, jelly or wine.



Elderberry is in the honeysuckle family, Caprifoliaceae, whose Greek root words mean "goat leaves." That makes sense for most honeysuckles, with undivided (simple) leaves in twos arranged opposite one another on the stem, and shaped sort of like goat's ears! Leaves of elderberry also have opposite arrangement, but they are compound leaves, with the green blade divided into smaller leaflets not at all resembling goat's ears! Their leaves actually resemble somewhat those of an ash tree.

The botanical name of our native "common elderberry" is *Sambucus canadensis*. "Sambucus" comes from the Greek word "sambuke," an ancient stringed instrument made from elderwood! It ranges throughout North America. Our elderberry may also be classified as a subspecies of European black elder *Sambucus nigra* and is thus named *Sambucus nigra subspecies canadensis*. As for the common name, "elder" is said to be derived from an Anglo-Saxon word "aeld" meaning "fire." Mythology tells of the fiery Elderberry Goddess who embodied the spirit or spark of life! Fairyland is also known as "Eld" in Celtic lore, which says that you may see a fairy procession if you sit under an elder tree when the berries are ripe! Guess this is the "enchanted" part!

The following quote is from Bob Osbourne, owner of Cornhill Nursery:
"This is a vastly underrated native fruit. It is an upright, somewhat coarse bush with showy white flowers, followed by deep purple fruits that ripen in early fall. Although bland for fresh eating it is superlative in jams, jellies, syrups, pies and especially wines. These varieties are selected for high yield and flavour. We recommend you order at least two different varieties for proper pollination." www.cornhillnursery.com.

In the video "Edible Wild Plants: Natural Health Video Series," botanist Jim Meuninck features fresh elderberry flowers fried into pancakes, and berries made into a sticky taffy-like candy.

And stems of elderberry have been fashioned into whistles, bean shooters and popguns! Here's an Oklahoma winery site where instructions for popguns are provided, and elderberry is extolled as "the medicine chest of the common man"! <http://www.nuyakacreek.com/elderberry.htm> .

And recently an antiviral extract of elderberry, Sambucol, has demonstrated in clinical trials to be an effective treatment for flu.

Elderberry grows well in low places, like roadsides ditches. It is a shrub that can be 30 feet high. The European elder grows taller. There are some really nice horticultural varieties available for landscaping, including one with blue berries and one with purple leaves. Elderberries are perennials hardy to Zone 3, whose stems die back in winter and sprout out again each spring. Apparently they will remain evergreen in South Florida.

So, do have respect for your "Elders"!