

Year Round Gardening

Elderberries: A Striking and Useful Addition to your Landscape

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American elder (*Sambucus canadensis*) is native to all of the eastern two thirds of the United States. It can be grown as a small tree or a large shrub ranging from 5 to 12 ft. A profusion of flat topped clusters of small fragrant white flowers are held high above the foliage for a sensational display in June and July. These clusters can reach 15 inches across providing a highly visible display.

The divided foliage provides a soft texture when planted next to needled evergreens or large leafed, coarse shrubs. The arching form of the branches offers a graceful silhouette the winter landscape. In late summer, large clusters of dark purple berry-like fruits attract birds. The berries are safe for human consumption if cooked. Take care not to include stems or leaves in foods, parts other than the berries are toxic to humans. Berries are commonly used for jams and pies.

Several cultivars have been selected for superior foliage and color. *S. canadensis* 'Aurea' has golden yellow leaves that create a striking contrast when placed against a dark background. 'Acutifolia' is a smaller cultivar reaching only 6 ft in height with deeply divided leaflets



that provides a tropical texture. *Sambucus nigra* 'Eva' Black Lace and *S. nigra* 'Gerda' Black Beauty are developed from an elder native to Europe. Both cultivars have dark purple foliage, fragrant pink blooms and red to purple fruits. The lacy, finely-cut foliage of both cultivars mimic Japanese Maples but they are more tolerant of climate and soils found in the Midwest.

The species form, *S. canadensis*, is best used as a naturalizing plant or as a living fence at the edge of the garden because it tends to spread and form thickets. Elder can be also be used as an understory planting. Be mindful to place them where the berries can drop without creating a problem. 'York' and 'Adams' are especially heavy fruiting cultivars.

Elderberries are easy to prune because they stay a manageable size even at maturity. The stems are quick to renew if damaged by ice or heavy snows. They grow well when neglected but have a better appearance when given an annual shaping and thinning to remove old and damaged stems.

When you have questions, Colorado State University Extension has research-based answers. Get answers to your horticulture questions by visiting ask.extension.org or by calling a Colorado Master Gardener Volunteer at 520-7684, 9:00 to 12:00 Monday – Thursday.