

# Elder

**Botanical name:** *Sambucus nigra*, *S. canadensis*, *S. mexicana*

**Family:** Caprifoliaceae (Honeysuckle family)

**Key words for family:** "Bushes with opposite leaves and flowers/bushes usually paired or in clusters.

Pithy stems

**Common name:** Elder, Elderberry, blue elder, black elder, sambucus, Tree of Medicine, Tree of Music, Magic tree

**Habitat and Range:** Elder grows in the moist soils of mountain hillsides, along roadsides and stream banks. They like the sun and are often found in clear cut areas or old burn sites where there is plenty of light. They can grow from sea level to 10,000 feet and can be found from the west to the east coast. *Sambucus nigra* is the native species found in Europe and *Sambucus canadensis* is the native species found in America. They can be used interchangeably but have subtle differences in taste.

**Botanical description:** Elder is a shrub or many-branched tree that can grow 25 ft tall, but is generally small at higher altitudes or in severe climates. The lance shaped leaves are compound with opposite pairs of two to four leaflets with a single leaflet at the tip of each compound leaf. The flowers grow in a dense upright cluster up to 4" across. They can be white to cream in color. Each individual flower has five petals and are fragrantly sweet. The berries grow in similar clusters. The blue and the black berries are used for medicine. The red berries are toxic.

**Parts used:** Berry, flower, leaf

**Harvesting and Processing:** Collect the clusters of flower and berries and dry on the stem on a screen in a well ventilated area and out of direct light. Look for the flower when the buds are just beginning to open (Mid-May-July). Be sure to leave enough flowers to produce berries. Harvest the berry when they are fully ripe but before they begin to dry up (Mid-late summer). Elder berries are an important food source for birds and mammals so please leave plenty and be mindful of wild animals when harvesting.

**Therapeutic Preparation:** The flower is best as a hot infusion or tincture for flu and colds. Berries are best in a syrup or elixir and commonly found in jam, jelly, chutney, pies, juice and wine. The flowers make a nice infused oil good for general first aid, chilblains and dry, chapped skin. The leaves can be used as a poultice, compress, infused oil and salve.

\*Preparations of elder are most effective if taken every few hours in smaller doses rather than in larger doses less frequently.\*

**Engergetic's/ taste:** Cool, bitter, spicy, slightly sweet

**Medicinal Actions:** antiviral, antibacterial, diaphoretic, alterative, mucilaginous, anti-inflammatory, relaxant, stimulant, expectorant, diuretic, mild laxative

### **Indications:**

- Elder flowers are a neutral diaphoretic so they can be used with any type of fever or constitution. They are nice in formulas that will tip the energetics one way or the other depending on what is needed or used on their own. They bring the blood to the surface, strengthen the periphery, open the pores and induce a sweat. They are gentle enough to use with children and the elderly and are very effective. They have a mild flavor that make a great tea especially with added lemon and honey. Always take diaphoretics hot to encourage blood flow and sweating. Diaphoretics taken cold act more like a diuretic and will help flush the system of waste products. Sometimes Elderflower can raise a temperature before it lowers it.
- Elder (flower and berry) has an affinity to the upper respiratory system. It is demulcent and antispasmodic. It thins and loosens mucus making it easier to remove from the body. It is useful with all kinds of cough and congestion including; croup, allergies and sinus infection, and sore throats. It tones, cools and moistens mucus membranes making them more resistant to infection.
- Elderberry is an immunomodulator. Meaning it doesn't just stimulate the immune system it helps regulate it to the appropriate level depending on what is needed. It is best to take as a cold and flu preventive but will also shorten the duration once onset has occurred.
- Both berry and flower are antiviral and have shown in studies to be effective against 10 different strains of the influenza. It is believed that the elder can disarm viruses before they replicate and then flush them out of the system and it appears to strengthen the cell membrane to prevent virus penetration.
- The flower and pollen of the elder has been used in cosmetic's for ages. It softens , cools and cleanses the skin. Elder flower water is used as a face conditioner and is used to lighten freckles.
- Elder leaf can be used topically for bruises, sprains, chilblains, wounds, eczema, rashes, boils ringworm and itchy conditions. Taken internal it has much of the same use as the flower, with the addition of being a purgative and strong laxative. The leaf is much stronger and more appropriate for adults.
- Elderberry is a blood builder and useful when treating anemia.
- Elderflower is used in all eye aliments. The Gypsies say it restores sight to the blind when the cause is shock to the nerves like from a bomb blast or something similar.

**Contraindications:** All Elder is toxic to some degree and contain hydrocyanic acid found mostly in the bark, root and seed. High dosage may cause nausea, vomiting and dizziness. It is advised to strain out or cook the seeds when using the berry. Otherwise no side effects or drug interaction have been reported.

### **Other uses:**

- The wood from Elder has been used to make musical instruments such as percussion stick, flutes and pan pipes.
- The Elder is considered a magic tree and is highly regarded and respected in all culture where elder grows. Associated with the Faery realm many folktale and superstitions are born from the Mother Elder. The tree is thought to bring protection and ward off evil.

Resources used to compile these notes and presentation:

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#### Elder studies

"Randomized study of the efficacy and safety of oral elderberry extract in the treatment of influenza A and B virus infections" *J Int Med Res.* 2004 Mar-Apr;32(2):132-40

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15080016>

University of Maryland Medical Center, "Elderberry"

<http://umm.edu/health/medical/altmed/herb/elderberry>