

# The East London Garden Society

## Plant Facts

### Elderberry



Sometimes propagated as an ornamental shrub, the elderberry bush is a member of the honeysuckle family. It's actually a small tree, with an abundance of delicate white flowers emerging as berry clusters generally between August and October, mostly in cool-to-warm areas of the country.

This tiny black fruit yields an abundance of juice for its small size. When cooking elderberries for sauce, some may prefer a little extra sweetness. Elderberries freeze in a glass jar after washing and patting dry. For sauce or syrup, dissolve honey in warm water, chill well, and then pour over the elderberries packed in freezer containers. When elderberry hunting, only the blue variety is good for eating, although they require cooking, because the raw berries contain a cyanide-like chemical.

In 1899, an American sailor accidentally discovered that cheap port wine coloured with elderberries relieved his arthritis. This may have been the basis for a number of experiments on the healing properties of this fruit.

*Sambucus Nigra* - European or black elder - may be the cultivar most often used for medicinal purposes throughout the world and over decades and centuries of

application. Modern research holds that elderberries may have anti-inflammatory, antiviral properties.

Other traditional uses of elderberry flowers are as external antiseptic washes and poultices to treat wounds, and as an eye wash for conjunctivitis and eye inflammation. It's been used for cosmetic purposes for millennia due to the reputation of distilled elderberry flower water to soften, tone, and restore the skin and lighten freckles.

The flowers can also be steeped in oil to make a lotion that relaxes sore muscles and soothes burns, sunburn, and rashes. Elderberry flowers are popular for making solutions to soften, tone, and restore the skin, relax sore muscles, soothing burns and rashes, as well as adding a bright, tart flavour to various foods, finally its ability to be made into wine or cordial.

The term 'elder' is derived from the Anglo-Saxon 'Aeld', meaning fire, because the hollow stems of this plant were used to gently blow on flames to intensify the fire. 'Sambucus' is a Greek word meaning 'wind instrument'. Native Americans once used elderberry branches to make flutes, so the tree was sometimes called the 'tree of music'.

Elderberries have been used not just for their unique tartness, but for many different traditional folk remedies. The dark berries are the good ones, with a history of treating conjunctivitis, cold and flu symptoms, reducing congestion, relieving arthritis pain, soothing upset stomachs, relieving gas, and for detoxification.

When next you pass, what some essentially call a prolific weed, look again.