



ELDERBERRY

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Elderberry is the elder tree of myth and medicine. If you are a Harry Potter fan, you will know that the most powerful wand was made of elder wood! Blue elderberry (*Sambucus nigra ssp. caerulea*) lives from western Mexico to the Canadian border. Black elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) is also a small tree native to California, as well as Europe, Africa and Asia. A related elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*) is native east of the Rockies. An ancient source of medicine for native peoples of North America and in Europe, it is being researched for how it can heal wounds, lighten pain, reduce fever and more. In Europe elderberry was considered home of gods and fairies. It was a sacred tree not only due to its inhabitants but also for the healing properties it had.

In the landscape, it is a wonderful small tree or shrub, providing shade, food and habitat for native animals, birds and insects. It blooms in sprays of white or cream in the spring, followed by berries that turn from red to purple-black. While its blossoms and ripe fruit are edible; the unripe fruit, leaves, stems and roots are toxic due to cyanogenic glycosides and alkaloids present. Elderberry jam, pies and wine are creations from the ripe fruit. The red berries of other species are toxic and should not be gathered.

Elderberry is easy to propagate and grow. While it loves water, it can be very successful in dry places, once established. Elderberry can grow from a small plant into a nice tree rapidly when happy. It usually grows to 20 to 30 feet maximum. It often creates a shrub that has many stems, though it can be trained to a single leader. It is deciduous; losing its leaves in winter. Once established, it can live on little water and is happy in sun or shade.



Sambucus nigra, black elderberry.
Photo by Gene Sturla

The berries of this small tree are important sources of summer food for many kinds of songbirds such as the western bluebird, indigo bunting, common house finch, red-shafted flicker, ash-throated flycatcher, black-headed grosbeak, scrub jay, mockingbird and western tanager.

Blue elderberry is planted because of its forage and cover value, productivity, adaptability, and ease of establishment. It is a useful ground cover for stabilizing streambanks and eroding sites. It provides food, cover, perching, and nesting sites for many species of birds and food and cover for various other wildlife, and it is important as browse for mule deer and elk. It is also habitat for many moths.

References

Bolli, R. *Plant Guide: Blue Elderberry*. U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service n.d. <https://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=SANIC5>

Blue Elderberry. CalScape. California Native Plant Society. n.d. [https://calscape.org/Sambucus-nigra-ssp.-caerulea-\(Blue-Elderberry\)?srchr=sc5d9a2ec896f9f](https://calscape.org/Sambucus-nigra-ssp.-caerulea-(Blue-Elderberry)?srchr=sc5d9a2ec896f9f)

Black Elderberry. CalScape. California Native Plant Society, n.d. [https://calscape.org/Sambucus-nigra-\(Black-Elderberry\)?srchr=sc5dc0acfd1cdd0](https://calscape.org/Sambucus-nigra-(Black-Elderberry)?srchr=sc5dc0acfd1cdd0)