

What the 2020s May Deliver to Elder Berry & Flower Growers

As we enter a new decade, the media prognostications are filled with warning clouds of very uncertain, skewed negative, economic and social weather. However, if the real weather will cooperate more often than not, I believe that the 2020s will see the Midwest Elderberry Cooperative and the agricultural presence of native elderberry become economically viable on a commercial-scale. More and more people are deciding to grow elder for both flower and berry harvest. I have set a planning goal of growing the acres in our rather loose network of members and farmers from about 450 acres today to 2250 in 2025. Preparation of the necessary infrastructure to handle and market that crop is already under way to support that growth - hopefully in approximate parallel development with a growing harvest.

The recent history of native North American Elder (*Sambucus canadensis*) as a commercial crop in America spans a little over 20 years at this point. The next ten years will be critical to its transition from its present, early stage entrepreneurial establishment to a sustainable commercial success. To that end we need more horticultural and technological research in a number of areas as well as increased education of growers and the functional ingredients marketplace where tens to hundreds of tons of berry and flower ingredients will be sold.

I have three pages that give an overview context to the next few years:

- Project 22-50: <https://midwest-elderberry.coop/cultivation/project-22-50.html>
- Functional Ingredient: <https://midwest-elderberry.coop/health-nutrition/functional-ingredient.html>
- Environmental benefits: <https://midwest-elderberry.coop/overview/elderberry--environment.html>

Current Grants & Projects for Hubs (Various Stages)

MEC's vision supports a loose network of independent growers selling their harvest and/or value added products directly to the public along with a decentralized system of commercial ingredient production and distribution hubs.

Terry Durham's River Hills Harvest is the original and most successful hub, being largely responsible for elderberry becoming the #1 commercial berry crop in Missouri - as well as the primary vehicle for grower recruitment and education. West Branch Elderberry is another hub in NW Iowa that aggregates or buys and resells berries from other growers or processes them into thermally dried berries and bulk frozen juice.

There are five other far-based organizations that have expressed interest in developing into hubs. The three most advanced down that road are:

- Madison, WI - Savannah Institute, which recently was awarded a grant to support their growth into elderberry as a producing crop with a potential of 50-200 acres. We expect to coordinate WI grower education outreach together with the WI Dept. of Agriculture's commitment to fund a field day along with other grants applied for.
- Montrose, MN - Veterans Farming Initiative, a relatively new regenerative agricultural operation that has good access to labor and capital resources as well as the potential to add adjacent acres to their present holdings. Also, their commitment to growing elderberry has sparked interest in neighboring farmers that could lead to about 100 acres of planted elder over the next few years.
- Northfield, MN - Main Street Project is currently reviewing their farm plan, which includes existing elderberry acres. They want to focus on flower production and have submitted a grant for a sizable forced air flower/herb dryer. The goal would be

- to develop a quality control handling and drying process with nutrient analysis to serve as a flower (and perhaps frozen berry) hub for southern MN western WI.
- Western PA - I met a grower last year at the Comprehensive Elderberry Workshop interested in planting 5 acres for elderflower production this year. The Main Street Project dryer project could be replicated for this grower. This principle of shared experience and resources will transfer across the membership as appropriate.
 - River Hills Harvest - I am assembling a team to develop a plan for growing RHH's business reach/depth and transferring long term ownership to MEC. The plan will include organization consolidation and an objectively fair business evaluation for Terry Durham and myself as well as options for a staged transfer to MEC so that the brand buys more berries and remains "Farmer Owned" for decades to come.

Current Grant Applications (Pending Approval):

- Michael Gold, U of MO: Pending - "Midwest Agroforestry Gateway to Adoption" for the National Agroforestry Center's Agroforestry Outreach to potential growers.
- Renewing the Countryside & Food Finance Institute Multi-state (IA, WI, MN) Specialty Crop Grant for Aronia, Black Currants & Elderberry is pending with MEC committed to grower education and market development.
- Tim Weisbrod, Houston, MN - Pending MDA specialty crop grant to trial a 1+ acre plot of elderberry grown with kernza, a perennial grain developed by the U of MN. If successful, this could open up hundreds of acres committed to kernza to adding elderberry to their farm plans for its known environmental benefits as well as for crop yield. General Mills has thousands of SD acres in kernza development.
- The Farm of Minnesota, Dan Moe - Pending grant for April 2020 Cuttings Field Day.

VAPG Planning (2020) & Production (2022?) Grants

Cooperative Development Services (Kevin Edberg & Bob Olson) have started the paperwork on a **\$60,000 Value Added Planning Grant** for MEC's decentralized production and distribution hub organization. It is due by early March 2020 and would start Sept. 1, 2020 if approved.

MEC needs support letters and matching funds commitments of \$30,000 from its development partners. The areas covered include: grower education in cooperative governance, regional organizational needs both in manpower and material infrastructure, an overall budget for expansion, and specific economic and marketing evaluation/feasibility for one or more ingredient processing facilities of **sufficient detail for submission to potential lenders/investors.** We need a good planning grant as foundation for later submission of a Value Added Production Grant to help fund early operations and marketing costs, but not the purchase of land, buildings or equipment.

In conjunction with the above MEC will be an exhibitor here to develop market potential: Functional Food Center is pleased to announce its 28th International Conference "Functional and Healthy Foods for Longevity: Bioactive Compounds and Biomarkers in Age-Related Diseases". The conference will be held at San Diego Convention Center, on **August 28-29, 2020**. This conference will bring together experts in medicine, biology, and the food industry to discuss the functional foods with bioactive compounds as dietary interventions for chronic diseases. Conference organized by Functional Food Center (Dallas, TX, USA), Functional Food Institute (San Diego, CA, USA), International Academic Society for Functional Foods and Bioactive Compounds, The journal of Functional Foods in Health and Disease, and The journal of Bioactive Compounds in Health and Disease.