

Midwest Elderberry Cooperative

Early History

The Midwest Elderberry Cooperative (MEC) was formed in 2012, originally as the Minnesota Elderberry Cooperative, under MN Statute 308B to be the organizational vehicle to assist small organic/natural farmers in elderberry production and processing in the Midwest. The Feasibility Study and Business Plan developed by outside, experienced professionals indicate reasonable opportunity to succeed. The Business Plan guided our next steps in organization and development with a name change to Midwest Elderberry Cooperative due to the addition of Wisconsin and Iowa growers to the founding Minnesota farmers.

The business plan included the adoption of cooperative legal structure designed by Dave Swanson, Partner of Dorsey & Whitney, making MEC the most professionally organized association of elderberry growers in America. As of 2019, membership was opened to commercial elderberry growers across the continental US with the goal of bringing 2,250 acres of acres into profitable elderberry and elderflower production by 2025.

As a result of over three years attendance at national trade shows, as of the end of 2018 MEC had marketing relationships with a few national/regional fruit brokers. More than four national brand buyers/product developers have expressed some level of interest in substantial and dependable supply of native elderberry ingredients for their product lines and several buyers inquired regarding substantial contracted production of bulk frozen and dried certified organic elderberries in advance of harvest. To insure adequate supply and planning for the River Hills Harvest brand and to enter into advanced contracted sales, MEC needs to greatly increase its aggregation of frozen berry inventory, especially of certified organic native elderberries, which means growth the its geographical reach, membership and service. Eventually every regional hub will have its own centralized frozen storage, but we will start by shifting River Hills Elderberry Producers, LLC elderberry purchase and inventory to MEC for the River Hills Harvest brand.

As an open, participating grower cooperative, MEC supports the development of members from planning to harvest. This features the aggregation of harvested berries and flowers, conversion into marketable ingredients, and sale to food and beverage producers. Part of the cooperative advantage lies in small to medium size grower access to shared capital equipment, such as an elderberry destemmer, freezer space, and market access/participation. Through its website and participation in trade shows, MEC develops buyer relationships, manages ingredient supply contracts and provides key intangible resources such as education about the cultivation, harvest and processing practices that meet or exceed federal and state food safety standards. We anticipate an expanding geographical presence as elderberry grows in acceptance and use as a commercial-scale specialty crop.

MEC are committed to enhanced farmer profitability through economies of scale and by managing the supply of regionally produced elderberry products to meet the growing consumer demand. Our goal is to provide easier market access for our increasing number of grower members. We facilitate sales wholesale buyers of berry and flower ingredients, including River Hills Elderberry Producers. River Hills Harvest produces and distributes elderberry products for both the retail and wholesale markets.

Beginning in January 2014, MEC actively recruited growers through their educational outreach on the Internet, at conferences and with hands-on workshops. We help new and existing elderberry growers improve cultivation and harvest efficiency through coordinated university research projects, various government programs and/or private initiatives. An overview of membership categories, benefits and how to become a member of the Midwest Elderberry Cooperative is summarized on our Membership page.

Our website provides content relevant to our cooperative's members and those interested in our mission. We do so within a context of general information about the cultivation and health benefits of North American Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*). Our cooperative is made up of growers participating in the growth and development of elderberry cultivation and sale of elderberry products in the upper Midwest.

The Midwest Elderberry Cooperative is built upon the success of our individual growers. The role of the cooperative is one as an educator in horticultural practice and quality process, research coordinator, product developer, marketer and buyer of convenient resort. In other words our growers decide when to sell their crop to the cooperative, which must, by necessity, often pay a lower price than what a buyer might receive in direct sales to customer/consumer. As of July 15, 2016, the members and board of directors voted to change our organization's name to Midwest Elderberry Cooperative from Minnesota Elderberry Cooperative in order to better reflect the actual/potential geographical presence and operations. We expect to share our progress with those adhering to similar goals and principles in other states. More information is available on the Elderberry America page.