

# Native Elderberry Overview

## General Information

- *Sambucus canadensis* ranges widely from northern Quebec to South America.
- Native to Eastern North America west of the Rocky Mountains.
- Elder can grow as much as 10 feet in one year, up to 15 feet in the wild
- *S. nigra* can live 25 yr. in southern Europe. It is believed *S. canadensis* is similar.
- Elder is an ochlopecies that exhibits a complex pattern of variation among its members but is not separable into distinct subspecific groups.
- Hence commercial cultivars exhibiting desired qualities for fruit and/or flower are mostly propagated using hardwood cuttings, though rhizomes and softwood cuttings would also work and preserve the host plant's phenotype expression.

## Planting

- Elderberry prefers a heavy soil high in organic material.
- Soil pH should be between 5.5 and 7.5.
- Elderberry can be grown from seeds, cuttings, suckers or rhizomes.
- Growers mostly plant hardwood cuttings that bear in the second-third year.
- Plantings establish by seed will take over 3 years to produce a crop, and the mature plant result is unpredictable in all biological characteristics.
- Stem cuttings should be taken from current year's growth when the plant is dormant. Optimal size is pencil to finger thickness, but other sizes have worked.
- Hardwood cuttings must contain two buds each, though more is OK. Rooting hormone is optional. Cuttings are usually stuck vertically but can be buried horizontally about an inch below the soil surface.
- Planting hardwood cuttings during dormant periods is best. They can be stuck anytime from late fall to May. Earlier is better. Frozen ground is not a problem.
- Cuttings can be grown in the greenhouse 6-8 weeks before field planting. Stick them in growing media with more heat to the root base and keep moist. New roots will appear on cuttings within two weeks. If the air is too hot, leaves outgrow roots.
- Greenhouse grown elder plants or plugs give you more flexibility in planting to allow for proper soil preparation. They must be moved outside into partial sun.
- Quality greenhouse plugs save about one season's time to production.
- Cultivars should be planted together in blocks of rows so that they flower together at the same time in proximity. This also reduces the chance of cultivar mixing.
- Cuttings should be set 2 to 4 feet apart in rows 10-12 feet apart to allow equipment to move between rows.
- Does best with ample moisture - especially needed regularly between flower bud and fruit harvest. Elder will survive dry conditions but not produce good fruit.
- Native elder grow on higher ground near swamps, bogs, streams and do well in transition zones tolerating short periods of flooding, but not long periods.
- Production will be maximized in plantings with full sun.
- Rooted cuttings should be planted slightly below the collar and the soil tamped.

- New elderberry plantings need good weed control as they do not compete well.
- New plantings need .6 to one inch of water per week

## Growing

- Elderberries are among the first plants to leaf out in the spring.
- Late spring frost rarely affects elderberry production.
- A single cultivar will give adequate pollination for good production
- Pollination mostly occurs through wind, insects play a minor role in pollination.
- Fruiting mainly occurs on the terminal portion of one and two year-old canes.
- Berries ripen from green to red to black with a hint of dusky purple.
- Berries ripen over a period of 6-8 weeks.
- Water requirements are one inch per week during the growing season and more during drought and fruit ripening.
- Elderberry plants are shallow rooted, thus, moisture, and most nutrients are received in the top 6-8 inches of soil. They favor a moldy leaf, composted soil.
- Mulch with hardwood chips, hay, straw, poultry bedding, shredded paper or bark.

## Fertilizing

- Most growers use organic sources of fertilizer. Check with your certifier.
- Use 10-10-10, apply 4oz per age of the plant, not to exceed one pound per plant.
- Apply fertilizer in the early spring at about leaf out, late February.
- Additional Nitrogen, up to one pound of ammonium nitrate per plant, can be applied in late May to early June.
- Neem has been used successfully as both a soil conditioner and for pest control.

## Pruning

- There are three recommended pruning methods: 1) selectively remove dead and undesirable canes each year; 2) remove all canes near ground level every other year; 3) remove all canes annually near ground level when the plant is dormant.
- Most commercial growers remove all canes annually as the plants go dormant. This practice spurs vigorous new growth and results in a shorter window for fruit ripening with fewer but larger, more evenly ripening clusters
- Selective pruning results in a longer period of harvest and many small clusters but shortens the total required growing season.
- Production will increase rapidly the first three years.
- Browsing by deer can decrease production significantly.
- Birds and small animals are attracted to the elderberry fruit.

## Harvesting

- The entire cluster is cut off at harvest. Some cultivars ripen by cluster finger.
- Berries should be processed shortly after harvest to preserve quality
- Stems should be removed; this can be done before or after berries are frozen
- Berries should be frozen quickly after harvest to preserve freshness.