



**ELDERBERRY/
ELDERFLOWER**
(*Sambucus nigra*)

Family: Caprifoliaceae



Common name : Common elder

Description

Deciduous shrub or small tree to 6m tall. Cork-like bark. Extends vegetative shoots. Leaves pinnate, 3-9 leaflets, ovate, 2.5 – 9cm long, green in colour. Flowers white – flat topped cymes up to 21 cm in diameter. Calyx narrow, corolla 4-4.5 mm. 5 lobed. Fruit – a fleshy black drupe/berry when ripe. Flowers have a specific odour. (Fisher, p 76-77).

Habitat

Native to Europe, elder thrives in woods, hedges, and on waste ground. It is now found in most temperate regions of the World, including New Zealand.

Cultivation

Is a hardy bush. Likes rich, moist neutral to alkaline soil in sun or partial shade. Best propagated by softwood cuttings in summer, or hardwood cuttings in winter. Can be pruned back in Winter to maintain shape. Prone to blackfly in poor conditions and may be affected by mosaic virus. (Bown, p 347).

Historical

Sambucus is from the Greek word sambuke, “a musical pipe” for which the new shorts of elder bushes were traditionally used. Healers such as Hippocrates and Dioscorides wrote about the virtues of Elder tree in the fifth century BC. It has been used for centuries to treat colds and influenza.

Culinary

The flower heads can be fried in batter. Flowers give a muscatel flavour to stewed fruit, jellies, and jam (especially gooseberry jam). Fruits are made into sauce. The flowers are used to make elderflower cordial or while the berries can be boiled to make a syrup. (Bown, p 347).

Elderflower Sparkler

Ingredients:

4 large fresh elderflower heads
750g castor sugar
475mls hot water
2 tbsp white wine vinegar
juice and pared rind of one lemon
4 L water.

Method

1. Mix the sugar with the hot water. Pour the mixture into a large glass container. Add all the remaining ingredients. Stir well, cover, and leave for about 5 days.

2. Strain off the liquid into sterilized screw-top bottles. Leave for a further week or so.

Serve very cold with slivers of lemon rind.

(Clevely et al, p209.)

Medicinal

Fisher (p 77-78) advises that the flowers have antiviral action and extracts of the fruits have been shown to inhibit 10 strains of influenza virus types A and B, and HIV and herpes simplex virus. Both leaves and flowers have been shown to have anti-inflammatory action, while the berries, rich on anthocyanidins have strong free-radical scavenging activity – thus are antioxidant.

Elderberry can be taken as a syrup for coughs and colds; Elderflower can be taken as an infusion. A multicentre clinical study showed that Elderberry shortened the severity and duration of influenza. (Zakay-Rones et al, 2004).

Constituents

Flowers contain flavonoids (including rutin), and sterols (including B-sitosterol, campesterol, and stigmasterol.). The flowers are rich in minerals, especially potassium (8-9%).

Berries are rich in flavonoids including anthocyanins. The anthocyanins cyaniding 3-glucoside and cyaniding 3-sambubioside are the major active constituents.

Elderberries have almost five times as many anthocyanidins as blueberries and twice the overall antioxidant capacity of cranberries.

Contraindications/cautions

Unripe fruit can cause diarrhoea. A small number of people are allergic to elder pollen.

References:

- Bown, D. (1995) Encyclopedia of Herbs and their Uses. Dorling Kindersley. NSW. Australia.
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Braun, L and Cohen, M. (2007). Herbs and Natural Supplements. An evidence-based guide. 2nd Edition. Churchill Livingstone. Sydney, Australia.
Zakay-Rones, Z., Thom, E., Wollan, T. (2004) J Int Med Res. 32(2):132-140