

*Sambucus canadensis*

[Synonyms : *Sambucus glauca*, *Sambucus humilis*, *Sambucus nigra*, *Sambucus nigra* subsp. *canadensis*, *Sambucus simpsonii*]

**AMERICAN ELDER** is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to eastern North America it has tiny creamy white flowers that are more fragrant than elder (*Sambucus nigra*).

It is also known as American elderberry, Black-berried elder, Blackberry elder, Black elder, *Chaputa* (Dakota North American Indian), Canadian elder, Common elder, Common elderberry, Elder, Elderberry, Elder blow, *Fleur sirop* (West Indian), *Kanadanselja* (Finnish), Rob elder, *Skirariu* (Pawnee North American Indian), Sweet elder, *Suyeau* (West Indian), Tea elder, *Wagathahashka* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), and Wine elder.

Warning – the fresh plant (to varying degrees) including the root and the berries can be poisonous for humans and animals. It can cause nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. It can be fatal for livestock.

*Canadensis* means ‘of or from Canada or north-eastern North America’.

Records illustrate how the American elder has been as valuable on the North American Continent as its close relative the elder (*Sambucus nigra*) has been in Europe. Children of many North American Indian tribes, not least the Meskwaki, Pawnee, Ponca, Menominee, Dakota, Omaha and Seminole used the stems (cleared of pith) as pop guns (and pea shooters, whistles and flutes). Hunters in the Houma tribe once used the stems to make blowguns – and Seminole Indian medicine men also used them as blowing tubes which enabled them to place drugs with greater precision.

Local Indian tribes such as the Chippewa, Dakota, Omaha, Cherokee, Meskwaki, Pawnee, Iroquois and Ponca not only ate the fresh small, deep purple-black berries but some (particularly the Omaha, Pawnee, Ponca and Dakota) also made a drink (apparently pleasant-tasting) by dipping the flowers in hot water. Both the Chippewa and Iroquois tribes stored the fruit for food in Winter and/or for provisions for their hunters. Cherokee Indians used the fruit to make wine (as well as pies and other preserves), Meskwaki Indians made the fruit into jam, and Iroquois Indians used them for sauces and porridge – but authorities note that the Seminole tribe viewed the plant as a famine food.

The plant featured in the rituals of several North American Indian tribes. It played a role in purification at Seminole funerals, and a flower decoction was one of the ingredients used by the Iroquois in corn (*Zea*) planting ceremonies.

Apparently Meskwaki Indians used the inner bark as an insect repellent.

American elder was a source of medicines for many of the North American Indian tribes. The Menominee tribe used a tea made from the dried flowers to ease fever, whereas the Iroquois used the berries – and the former was introduced to European settlers. Cherokee Indians used the plant to cause sweating, and they and the Seminole, Micmac, Chippewa, some of the Algonkin, the Mohican and the Iroquois tribes all used it to cause vomiting. It was a laxative (or more often purgative) for the Mohican, some of the Algonkin, the Cherokee, Meskwaki, Micmac and Iroquois Indians – and the latter gave it to both adults and children. Micmac Indians valued its sedative properties, the Cherokee tribe respected its disinfectant qualities, Thompson Indians used it to ease toothache, and the Houma

Indian tribe bathed in a bark decoction to counter pain. Both the Mohican and Delaware Indians used it for easing wind in children. Iroquois Indians also valued it for kidney complaints, they and the Choctaw tribe prescribed it as a remedy for liver disorders, for the Delaware it was a jaundice remedy, and the Meskwaki and Cherokee Indians used it to treat fluid retention. Both Creek and Meskwaki tribes prescribed it for treating some female ailments, while the Iroquois turned to it to treat measles, mumps, heart problems and venereal disease. It was taken by the Delaware Indians to purify blood, and the Iroquois and Chickasaw tribes relied upon it for easing headaches. While the Meskwaki Indians used it generally for lung problems, the Iroquois valued it for treating diphtheria – and the Cherokee and Rappahannock turned to it as a treatment for rheumatism. It was also used by the Delaware, Rappahannock, Houma, Cherokee and Iroquois tribes for skin problems (the latter applied it to both adults' and children's skins), the Cherokee used it to treat burns, and the Iroquois and Delaware valued it for healing wounds.

The cooked berries are safe to eat as an ingredient in jams, other preserves and pies, and the fruit are also used to make wine. (As they are a little insipid however they are usually mixed with other fruit.)

Bruised leaves have provided an insect and rodent repellent.

Medicinally, the dried flowers are employed in eye lotions and in Europe they are used as home remedies for sores but more particularly for bruises. In the Caribbean the dried flowers are infused as a tea for treating colds and fevers. Herbalists have also recommended it for treating rheumatism, gout and some skin disorders.