

Sambucus ebulus

[Synonyms : *Ebulum humile*, *Sambucus humilis*]

DWARF ELDER is a deciduous perennial. Native to Asia, North Africa and central and southern Europe (including Britain), it has tiny scented, white to pink flowers, occasionally purple-tinged.

It is also known as *Attich* (German), *Attichwurzel* (German), *Baza chabzdová* (Slovak), *Bez chebdí* (Czech), Blood hilder, Bloodwort, Dane ball, Dane's blood, Dane's elder, Dane weed, Danewort, Dwarf elden, Dwarf elderberry, *Ebbio* (Italian), *Ebulo* (Esperanto), *Ébulo* (Portuguese), *Engos* (Portuguese), Ground elder, *Hièble* (French), *Holunder* (German), *Mannablod* (Swedish), *Mushkiara* (Hindi), *Sabuguei-inho* (Portuguese), *Sommarfläder* (Swedish), *Sommarhyll* (Swedish), *Sureau yéble* (French), *Vouzi* (Greek), Walewort, Wallwort, Water elder, *Yèble* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Yezgo* (Spanish), *Ysgawen Fair* (Welsh), and *Zwergholunder* (German).

Warning – the root and berries are poisonous and cause vertigo and nausea. They can also be a violent purgative. It should only be used under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. (Despite this warning it should be noted that no official records of poisoning exist in Britain.)

Ebulus is both a Greek and a Latin name for this species.

Dwarf elder's presence in Britain seems according to legend to be laid at the feet of the Danes. It appears either that the plant sprang from the blood of Danes slaughtered in battle on English soil or that the Danes themselves returned to the scenes of their defeat and planted the shrub where their countrymen died. In either case this is said to explain the names Danewort and Walewort (in the latter *wal* meant 'slaughter'). An alternative theory for the former has also been suggested ie. that it is derived from the word *danes* meaning 'diarrhoea' which may be caused if it is taken internally.

This perennial has been familiar in Europe for thousands of years. Archaeologists have found remains of dwarf elder not only in Neolithic (2700-1900 BC) digs but also among the Swiss Lake villages at Robenhausen which are much older as they date back to about 8000 BC. Not only was it familiar to the ancient Greeks as both a hair and material dye and a medicine (the 1st Century Greek physician, Pedanius Dioscorides is understood to have described dwarf elder precisely) but it was also known to the Romans.

The main use for this plant has depended upon its small purplish-black berries that yield a blue dye which can be used on leather and yarn and was known to both the Anglo-Saxons and the Gauls. Today in Romania it can be found as a colouring in wine, and the berries can also be used to colour leather blue.

The leaves (the smell of which on the plant many say is repellent to mice and moles) have been used as a tea.

Medicinally, herbalists recommended an infusion of the leaves for treating fluid retention, kidney and liver disorders, jaundice and gout. A decoction of the root was once considered appropriate treatment for snake bites and rabies. [It is the American dwarf elder (*Sambucus canadensis*) that is used today in homoeopathic treatments, but some authorities claim that dwarf elder is used in some proprietary medicines.]