

*Sambucus nigra*

[Synonyms : *Sambucus cerulea*, *Sambucus glauca*]

**ELDER** is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to western Asia, North Africa and Europe it has small heavily fragrant, creamy-white flowers.

It is also known as *Äkta fläder* (Swedish), *Alhorn* (German), *Almindelig hyl* (Danish), American elder, Battery, *Baza čierna* (Slovak), *Bez černý* (Czech), *Bezinky* (Czech), Black-berried European elder, Black elder, Blue elderberry, Boon tree, Boor tree, Bore tree, Bore-wood, Borrall, Boun tree, Bountry, Bour tree, Bull tree, *Busine* (Russian), Common elder, Common European elder, Devil's tree, Devil's wood, Dog tree, *Dolder* (German), Elderberry, Eldern, Eldrum, Ellan, Ellanwood, Eller, Ellern, Ellet, Ellhorn, Ellumblow, Elnorne, European black elder, European black elderberry. European elder, Fairy tree, *Fläder* (Swedish), *Flieder* (German), German elder, God's stinking tree, *Holler* (German), *Holunder* (German), Hylantree, Hylder, *Hyll* (Swedish), Judas tree, *Kanadafläder* (Swedish), *Kanadanselja* (Finnish), *Kelkenbusch* (German), *Kozičky* (Czech), *Musflieder* (German), *Mustaselja* (Finnish), Pipe tree, *Psí bez* (Czech), *Sabugueiro* (Portuguese), *Sabugueiro Vulgar* (Portuguese), *Saeue* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Sambreo* (Italian), *Sambuco* (Italian), *Sambuco nero* (Italian), *Sambuko nigra* (Esperanto), *Sauco* (Spanish), Scaw, Scawen, *Schwarzer Holunder* (German), *Seu* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Smradinky* (Czech), *Smradlavý bez* (Czech), *Soc* (Rumanian), *Sureau* (French), *Sureau noir* (French), Sweet elder, Tea elder, Trammon, *Uti khaman* (Arabic), *Vanlig fläder* (Swedish), *Vlier* (Dutch), Whit-aller, and *Ysgawen* (Welsh); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of compassion, consolation (flower), and jealousy.

Warning – all green parts, the raw berries and the fresh juice should not be taken internally as they are poisonous (particularly in northern England). They can cause nausea, vomiting, dizziness, increased pulse rate and convulsions. It can be poisonous for some animals which normally avoid it.

*Nigra* means 'black' with reference to the fruit.

The English common name Elder is said to be derived from an Anglo-Saxon word for 'fire' *aeld*. This probably came about because the pith can be removed easily from the stems of young branches and the resulting hollow pipe was used (like bellows) to blow up a fire.

Archaeological digs have unearthed evidence of the use of the elder's seeds and branches during Stone and Bronze Ages. This supports the view that from at least ancient Egyptian times to the present day the tree has provided medicinal and culinary support, not least in bearing flowers and its small, shiny black berries that can be used to make wine. The Egyptians used the flowers in lotions to improve the complexion, and also to heal burns.

In northern Europe Freyja, goddess of some of the early tribes, chose to live in a (black) elder for its beneficial medicinal qualities and in that region the tree used to be called 'the medicine chest of the country people'. However most of the plant (including the berries) is poisonous if eaten raw and it may well be this fact that contributed to its chequered history in legend and folklore.

Throughout Europe particularly during the Middle Ages (and perpetuated in the remotest parts even today) its magical properties were ambivalent – sometimes negative, sometimes

positive according to the locality. On the negative side it was believed to be the home of various European spirits (and witches) and was associated with evil. Sleeping in its shade, planting it near a house or making a cradle from its wood were all likely to lead to dangerous results. A young child beaten with elder was likely to have stunted growth. Even in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in England an injury received from an elder was viewed as fatal (it was told how a gamekeeper died after tripping on an elder bush – and subsequently wounding his hand on a spike). Elder brought indoors could bring the Devil as well, and death in the family would follow if elder was burnt as kindling. In some areas the Devil would come down the chimney if elder was burning on the hearth, while in others he would be seen sitting on the chimney-top. There was much fear about chopping an elder down as the tree's witch might take revenge and the wood might well creak or warp if made into furniture – unless while chopping the words

Owd girl, give me thy wood,  
And I will give thee some of mine,  
When I grow into a tree.

were recited at the same time – or an apology was made. One belief contended that the lumberman would be dead within three days, whereas another claimed that no retribution would follow if the witch received a loud apology before the axe fell. (Even to this day in some places in Europe elderly people will not burn elder and will doff their cap to the tree.) In Oxfordshire in England it is alleged that a king and his army (nobody seems to know which king or army) were turned into a circle of about 70 standing stones (known as the Rollright Stones by a witch who herself had been transformed into an adjacent elder tree. In the past local people feasted on Midsummer Eve and 'bled' the 'witch'. After this catalogue it is hardly surprising that elder wood was never used to make meat skewers or employed for ship or boatbuilding.

A medieval Christian legend suggests that Judas Iscariot (who betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver) hanged himself from an elder tree. As a result the elder is said (by those who so believe) to bear a curse one manifestation of which is the growth of the Judas' Ear Fungus on it. Yet another traditional legend contends (in competition with other woods) that the elder was used to make the Cross of Calvary.

This last legend is referred to by the famous English bard, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) in *Love's Labour's Lost*. He also mentions the tree in four other plays, most notably in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in which the Host of the Garter Inn refers to its medicinal reputation as he declares

.....Is he dead, my Ethiopian? Is he dead, my  
Francisco? ha, bully! What says my Aesculapius? my Galen? my  
heart of elder? ha! is he dead, bully-stale? Is he dead?

On the positive side elder trees would be grown near the house as protection against witches and as it was supposed to be able to keep flies away it could be planted advantageously near a pantry window. The tree would be grown near a grave to protect the body of the deceased, or a bush of elder shaped into the form of a cross could be planted on it. On the way to the cemetery the driver of the hearse would often have held an elder whip. It was considered safe, even early in the 20th Century, to shelter from lightning under an elder tree as some Christians thought that the lightning would never strike a tree which they believed had been used to make the Cross of Calvary. And as a prevention against saddle sores many held that an elder twig (preferably jointed) could be carried in the pocket to good effect when out riding.

Domestically for centuries the flowers have been/are frittered (particularly in Austria), eaten raw or used as decoration. The young shoots have been/are pickled, and the fruit (which are high in Vitamin C) can be made into jams, conserves, jellies, punch and wine.

One use that appears not to have carried on to the present day was that practised by the Romans for whom the elderberry juice provided a black hair dye. Cosmetically however elder flowers are used today still in creams to clean skin and also to ease various skin disorders.

Europeans fashioned the hollow stems into wind instruments and blowguns, while the North American Indians who did likewise also wove the stems into baskets.

A deep blue dye can be obtained from the berries.

Today in England particularly elder tends to be associated with elderflower wine. In past centuries many Kentish orchards were given over to elder trees with this end in mind. The fruit from them were even exported as a large proportion of Europeans on the continental mainland believed that the berries dried there were not able to produce elderberry wine with such a good flavour and aroma. However records show certainly in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century if at no other time that the wine itself was used as an ingredient in the adulteration of cheap port wine which was then presented or traded nefariously as a tawny port. In Portugal the practice became so widespread that in 1747 the cultivation of the elder tree was forbidden in an unsuccessful attempt to try and halt it. One quite fascinating consequence (of the persisting adulteration) that occurred 150 odd years later was that the adulterated beverage was found to be a cure for rheumatic pains. In 1899 a Prague physician was told by an American sailor that his rheumatic pains were cured if he got drunk on what he believed was genuine port. This allegation was investigated and culminated in the discovery that the happy tar had in actual fact been imbibing adulterated cheap port wine. Further research by a group of eminent physicians in Prague and by similar groups in other countries confirmed the American sailor's claims, noted that genuine port was of no medicinal benefit in this instance and identified the proportion of elderberry juice to port wine as significant in many cases in providing this cure.

Today this fine white wood is used for turning and carpentry – and the stem pith is used in making microscopy slides.

The 'medicine chest' referred to earlier was large and of long standing, going back in Europe at least to the time of the Ancient Britons. In earlier periods some herbalists were convinced that an elder was of even greater value medicinally if it had grown from a seed deposited by a bird in the decayed stump of a hollow tree. Elder was used to treat ailments ranging from snake bites and rabies to coughs, toothache and melancholia. Fresh or dried berries were used for treating fluid retention, and headaches could be eased by sniffing the juice from fresh young leaves. A traditional remedy for colds still followed by some today was a hot 'toddy' of elderflower wine. (In 1988 the French made a film called *The Sorceress* which was based on fact and described how in the Middle Ages a European herbalist used elder to counter annual fevers experienced by the townsfolk of one area.) Elder is also used in homoeopathic treatments.

It is the birthday flower for 29<sup>th</sup> March.