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A Big Welcome to the Fairy King But Beware the Stinking Elder ! Some Selected Folklore of the Elderberry

- The elderberry wand is said to be the most powerful wand ever made.
- “*Aeld*” means fire in old English, so the name “ELD”erberry comes from the use of its hollow branches to blow into a small fire to get it going. (stone age evidence from 10,000 years ago)
- The elderberry is in the honeysuckle family *caprifoliaceae* (goat leaves) as elderberry leaves are thought to be shaped like the ear of a goat
- It is a traditional European belief that If one sleeps under an elderberry at midsummer in denmark one might see the fairy king and all his royal party
- The Latin name for elderberry is *sambuca*. The original sambuca is a string or wind instrument made from the elderberry wood.
- *The Little Eldertree Mother* is a Hans Christian Andersen story from 1845.
- Europeans in medieval times would lash elderberry twig hoops to parts of the body that had rheumatism and believed that this would cure it.
- In southern Europe elderberries were added to port wine because they were cheaper than grapes. People began to talk about the healing effects of port wine and it became very popular. Now we suspect that it wasn't the port wine but the elderberries that had been secretly added that was helping everybody so much.
- In Europe while harvesting elderberries they recommend leaving some for the migrating birds, dormice and voles as they understand that the elderberry is their important food source.
- Advice: When you begin to pick a few elderberries off the stems, you better keep harvesting all you can right then and there. At Elmore Roots we have learned that the birds start talking to each other and say “uh oh this guy's going to take our elderberries! We'll wait until he leaves tonight and gather them all up!” The times we have not followed our own advice they are all gone by morning, every last one.
- Local legend Lewis Hill of Greensboro shares:
 - ◇ “In Europe in the middle ages the elderberry enjoyed a place of honor few fruits have ever attained. It was credited with amazing health-giving powers and said to cure everything from arthritis to gout. Even the flowers contained healing powers.”
 - ◇ “Old time Vermonters never get colds in the winter because they are sipping elderberry juice from their freezer all winter. “
 - ◇ “The sipping of a bit of elderberry wine each day for medicinal purposes may not have been a joke after all ,and the prim and proper little old ladies who imbibe may actually have their health in mind.”

(Compiled by of David Fried of Elmore Roots Nursery in Elmore Vermont, September, 2016)



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Do not confuse the edible purple elderberry with the red berried stinking elder!

The leaves, stems, unripe berries, seeds and roots of elderberry contain small amounts of hydrocyanic acid that is converted into cyanide when consumed by people. These compounds are neutralized if the berries are cooked, cool processed or fermented. The levels vary by species and seem to not be very high in *S. canadensis*, (American or Common Elderberry) but are higher in *S. racemosa* or Red Elderberry—also called stinking elder because of the odor of its leaves. This is probably why historically peoples in the northeast have used the purple berried *S. canadensis* and the red berried *S. racemosa* (also known as *S. pubens*) is considered toxic.

Sambucus canadensis: American or Common Elderberry

- White flowers
- Flower cluster is flat and wider than long
- Flowers in summer in northeast
- 5 to 11 leaflets (usually 7)
- Grows in moist soils, prefers sun; often found along roadsides
- Purplish black berries when ripe
- Berries ripen in late summer, early fall

Sambucus racemosa (aka *pubens*): Red or Stinking Elderberry

- Creamy or yellowish-white flowers
- Flower cluster is cone-shaped and taller than wide
- Flowers in spring in northeast
- 5 to 7 leaflets
- Grows in moist, rich soils, more likely to be found in rocky woods than *S. canadensis*
- Red berries when ripe
- Berries ripen in early summer

UVM Extension helps individuals and communities put research-based knowledge to work.

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