

Elderberries

Sambucus nigra

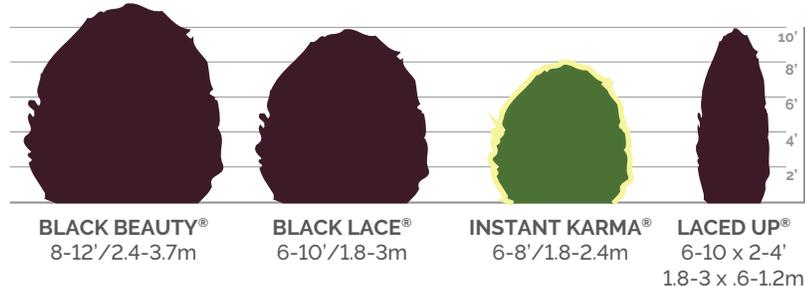


It's hard to believe that plants as ornamental as **Black Lace**® elderberries produce tasty fruit. After all, people all over the country have planted them in their landscapes simply for the beauty of their foliage and flowers. Yet elderberries, revered since ancient times, offer great versatility in the kitchen and at the table. They are widely consumed in Europe, but their edible aspects have been largely ignored here. In fact, **Black Lace**® and **Black Beauty**® were developed at the East Malling Research Station in Kent, U.K., which trials elderberries specifically for culinary and medicinal use.

Perhaps one of the reasons that elderberry is under-appreciated as an edible is because two different elderberry varieties are required for the plant to set fruit. If you grow one of these varieties, add the other to your landscape and reap bumper crops of beautiful purple-black fruit. Even if you don't have room for another elderberry, you can still get a harvest by using the flowers. These can be added to beverages, made into champagne, or dipped in batter and made into elderflower fritters.

Eating elderberries comes with a few important caveats: the leaves and stems of the plants are toxic, and the berries are only edible when ripe and cooked. Further, only varieties of *Sambucus nigra* (including **Black Lace**®, **Black Beauty**®, **Laced Up**®, and **Instant Karma**®) and *Sambucus canadensis* (including 'Adams' and 'York,') are edible. Other species are considered toxic and must not be consumed. If in doubt about the species of an elderberry, do not eat any part of the plant.

***Sambucus nigra* comparison chart**



Growing Elderberries

Zone: Hardy to USDA zone 4, heat tolerant to AHS zone 8

Exposure: Full sun preferred, part sun tolerated, especially in warmer climates.

Water: Low to average water needs; tolerant of some drought once established.

Soil: Not picky about soil, any well-drained average soil will do.

Pests: Elderberries are highly resistant to deer and rabbit damage. They can, however, be damaged by the elder borer in areas where elderberry grows wild. Though this pest kills entire stems, they rarely reach populations that cause severe or lasting damage to the plant.



Pruning: Prune in late winter or early spring. Elderberries flower on old wood, so heavy pruning will compromise fruit production. Remove dead or damaged wood and any weak stems. Older (4+ years) branches can also be pruned away as productivity decreases at this age.

Fertilizing: Apply a granular fertilizer formulated for flowering shrubs (like a rose fertilizer) in early spring, just as new growth is beginning.

Harvesting: Flowers: harvest only newly opened flower clusters, ideally in the morning. Older flowers lack sweetness and may have off-odors. Berries: Cut entire clusters from the plant once fruit is ripe, usually between late August and mid September. Ripe fruit will feel soft and give off a bright purple juice when squeezed. Both flowers and fruit can be held for short periods (a day or two) if necessary, refrigerated and covered loosely with damp paper towels.

Elderflower Water

One of the easiest, most satisfying ways to enjoy elderflowers is to make up a pitcher of refreshing elderflower water. This simple, pretty drink is popular throughout Europe; The rich, pink flowers of **Black Lace**®, **Black Beauty**®, and **Laced Up**® make this extra-special.

- 5-10 fresh elderflower clusters (depending on the size of your pitcher)
- 1 lime, halved and sliced ¼" (.25 mm) thick
- Ice cold water

Place elderflowers and limes in pitcher; pour cold water over to cover. Serve immediately or refrigerate for up to four hours.



Spiced Elderberry Sauce

Elderberries can be used in almost any recipe you would use other types of berries in: jams, pies, muffins, cordials, and liqueurs. This spiced sauce is an unusual use of the fruits, but makes a welcome accompaniment to autumn's heavier dishes. It is especially nice alongside venison or other game.

- 2 c ripe elderberries, plucked from their stems (very ripe fruits will fall off when the cluster is gently shaken; others will need to be separated manually)
- ¾ c granulated sugar
- ½-1" fresh ginger, peeled
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- ¼ tsp ground allspice
- ¼ tsp ground cloves

Place berries in a medium saucepan and allow to cook down until soft (about 15-25 minutes). Grate ginger over the pot, allowing gratings to fall into sauce and squeeze juice out of remaining pulp into sauce. Stir in sugar and remaining spices and allow to cook until slightly thickened.

Pour into clean containers. Sauce can be used immediately or stored in air-tight containers in the refrigerator for up to a month. Alternatively, sauce can be ladled into canning jars and hot-water-bath canned until lids seal for longer storage.

