

Introduction

MANY YEARS AGO, after we had settled onto our first homestead, a friend came out to visit. As Ben and I walked around the property, he bent down here, or reached there, collecting what seemed to me to be nothing but weeds or bark or other scraps of plants and vegetation. Or he would point at some mass of tangled green growing things, mentioning a number of names that made no sense to me at the time, rattling off different ways they could be used as food or medicine.

Ben was a forager, someone intimately familiar with the benefits of the abundant plant life all around us, something that most of us—including our family at the time—completely missed. Queen Anne’s Lace and plantain. Wood sorrell and wild hickory (pig nut). Elderberry and acorns. Some are food. Some are medicine. Many are both.

If you are reading this book, then my hunch is you either already are into or are interested in learning more about such things—foraging, food as medicine, perennial plants with a rich culinary, craft, and medicinal history; creating a more sufficient farm or homestead, and much more. So, I want to start with a suggestion. Once you finish learning about elderberry, don’t stop! Elderberry is just one, albeit an exceptional one, of so many plants surrounding us that have innumerable benefits. Start with elderberry, but continue to learn, plant, forage, enrich, and explore long after.

The book follows a simple structure. It will start with just a brief survey of our long relationship with elder. We will cross time, cultures, and continents. Then, we will briefly look at elder's anatomy and terminology so that later in the book and out in the fields and forests, you better understand how to find and identify it. Next, we will talk about how to tend elderberry, from different ways to plant and propagate it to the most common diseases and pests that may afflict it. This naturally leads into a discussion on harvesting elderberries—both by foraging for them or from your own plantings. Since elderberries occur in abundance, knowing how to preserve the harvest comes immediately after. Last, we will look at the myriad ways elderberry can be used, both culinary and craft. By the end, I hope you will have a deeper appreciation for one of God's great gifts, the elder tree.

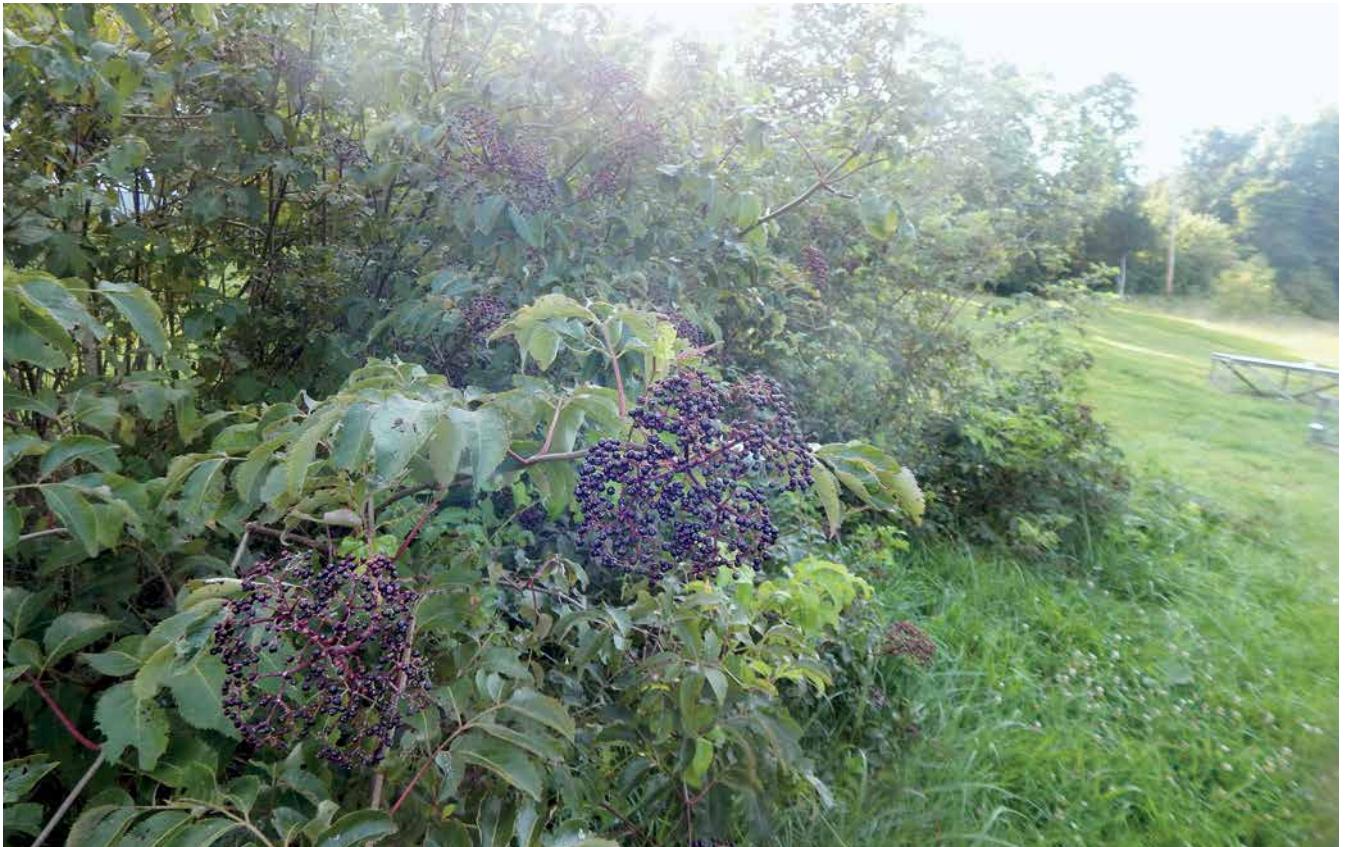
There was a great deal I couldn't fit into this introductory book, so if you want to learn more or connect, visit www.theelderberrybook.com

History

IN A HUMBLE 17th-century western European village, a grandma makes elderberry tea for her sick grandson. In a Mediterranean house in the 10th century, a man uncorks last year's elderberry wine, now ready to enjoy over dinner with friends. In a Roman town in 223 AD, a physician makes a paste of elderberry leaves and other herbs to apply to an unknown skin infection on his patient. On the Great Plains of America, an Indian cuts wood from a bush to fashion into a new flute for his son, while in Greece a young lady plays the *sambuke*, a wooden stringed instrument.

What do these people, diverse through time and geography, have in common? A native plant known by many, many names—Arbre de Judas, Baccae, Baies de Sureau, Black-Berried Alder, Black Elder, Boor Tree, Bountry, Elder, Common Elder, Ellanwood, Ellhorn, European Alder, Fruit de Sureau, Grand Sureau, Hautbois, Holunderbeeren, Sabugeuiro-negro, Sambequier, Sambu, Sambuc, Sambuci, Sambucus, Sambucus nigra, Sambugo, Sauco, Saúco Europeo, Schwarzer Holunder, Seuillet, Seuillon, Sureau, Sureau Européen, Sureau Noir, Sus, Suseau, Sussier. To us, it is known as the elder or elderberry.

If the dog is humanity's best friend, then the elderberry may be its best plant friend, for this plant has been a part of our lives for many thousands of years. Let's look at our long relationship with the elder.



▲ The elder.

ANCIENT ELDERBERRY

Few plants have received the amount of attention across peoples and places like elder. Also, few plants have been with us as long—archaeological evidence has found elder seeds in sites over 9,000 years old. It makes sense. Few plants provide one-stop shopping like the elder. It is fruit, medicine, and craft, all in one fast-growing and resilient plant.

Since written sources are somewhat scarce for earlier periods, we will start with where elder, especially as used and understood today, begins: the Greek and Roman cultures. The founders of modern botany, pharmacology, herbology, and medicine all discuss, often at length, the elder.

Hippocrates, often called the “Father of Medicine,” has many comments about making use of the elder’s root, leaves, and juice. The leaves occur far more often than any other part.

Every third day, let him bathe, if it helps; if not let him be anointed; also let him take walks, if he is able, determining their distance in accordance with his food. Boil leaves of the elder tree and of the fleabane that is always tender, and give these to the patient to drink.¹

19. If the brain suffers from bile, a mild fever is present, chills, and pain through the whole head, especially in the temples, bregma, and the sockets of the eyes. The eyebrows seem to overhang, pain sometimes migrates to the ears, bile runs out through the nostrils, and the patient sees unclearly. In most patients, pain occupies one half of the head, but it can also arise in the whole head.

When the case is such, apply cold compresses to the patient’s head, and, when the pain and flux cease, instill celery juice into his nostrils. Let him avoid bathing, as long as the pain is present, take as gruel thin millet to which a little honey has been added, and drink water. If nothing passes off below, have him eat cabbage, and drink the juice as gruel; if not that, then the juice of elder leaves in the same way. When you think it is the right moment, give foods of the most laxative kind.²

Treat persons suffering from wounds by having them abstain from food, by administering an enema or giving a medication to evacuate the contents downwards from their cavity, and by having them drink water and vinegar, and take watery gruel. If the wound is inflamed, cool it with plasters; let the plasters be made from beets boiled in water, or celery, or olive leaves, or fig leaves, or leaves of elder or bramble, or sweet pomegranate; apply these boiled.³

HIPPOCRATES

Galen, one of the most prolific writers in all of ancient history (roughly half of all the literature we have from ancient Greece is attributed to him!), was a Greek physician and surgeon from 129 to 200 AD. He quoted Hippocrates often, and also added to some of the then commonly accepted uses of elder in medicine.

107 Danewort/Dwarf Elder and Elder

Danewort and elder may differ in size but they are similar in their leaves, flower, and seed, and they have almost the same properties. The root of danewort is especially good for clearing up and purging dropsy, and its leaves when cooked and eaten purge the bowels.⁴

Theophrastus, the famous Greek botanist, mentions elder a number of times, noting that it grew “chiefly by water,” something we discuss later when it comes to cultivating the plant. He also made many medicinal observations, though none about elderberry proper, noting that the best plant juices were collected during summer, whereas the best roots for medicinal use came in the spring and fall.

Again some are without knots, as the stems of elder, others have knots, as those of fir and silver-fir... Again there are differences in the “core”: in the first place according as plants have any or have none, as some say is the case with elder among other things; and in the second place there are differences between those which have it, since in different plants it is respectively fleshy, woody, or membranous; fleshy, as in vine fig apple pomegranate elder ferula; woody, as in Aleppo pine silver-fir fir; in the last-named especially so, because it is resinous.⁵

Dioscorides, a Greek doctor and pharmacologist who lived from around 40 to 90 BC, is the author of *De Materia Medica*, or *On Medical Material*. This illustrated five-volume book series was hand copied in Latin, Greek, and Arabic, and circulated all the way into

THAT PLANT OF GOD THAT HEALS ALL THINGS?

A number of quotes are attributed to Hippocrates regarding elder. After extensive searching, I was unable to confirm two in particular, “the plant of God that heals everything it touches” and the “medicine chest of the people.” I used a number of tools to try and confirm these quotes, including getting assistance from three different professors with specialties in the classics and ancient Near Eastern history, and still came up empty. This doesn’t mean that these two quotes are spurious, just that they may not belong to Hippocrates but some other person and ended up attributed to him, or that they do belong to him, but the original texts were lost and only secondhand sources remain for these attributions. Given that, for Galen and many Greek authors, we sometimes have a third or less of their total writings intact, this is quite possible. If anyone has access to any first or secondhand sources that use these quotes, please contact me.

the Middle Ages as the standard text covering around 600 plants and over 1,000 medicines made from them. Elderberry is listed in Book Four along with over half a dozen uses, from treating skin ailments to dropsy. Every part of the plant is discussed, from root to leaf:

This has the same properties and uses as that above—drying, expelling water, yet bad for the stomach. The leaves (boiled as vegetables) purge phlegm and bile, and the stalks (boiled as a vegetable) do the same. The roots (boiled with wine and given with meat) are good for dropsy. A decoction (taken as a drink) helps those bitten by vipers. Boiled with water for bathing it softens the womb and opens the vagina, and sets to rights any disorders around it. A decoction of the fruit (taken as a drink with wine) does the same things, and rubbed on it darkens the hair. The new tender leaves (smearred on with polenta) lessen inflammation, and smearred on, they are good for burns and dog bites. Smearred on with bull or goat grease they heal hollow ulcers, and help gout. It is also called heliosacte, sylvestris sambucus, or euboica; the Romans call it ebulus, the Gauls, ducone, and the Dacians, olma.⁶

Pliny the Elder, who lived from around 23 to 79 AD, was a noted Roman writer and scholar. His *On the Materials of Medicine* devotes an entire chapter to the elder:

Chapter 35. The Elder, Fifteen Remedies

A decoction of the leaves, seed, or root of either kind, taken in doses of two cyathi, in old wine, though bad for the upper regions of the stomach, carries off all aqueous humours by stool. This decoction is very cooling too for inflammations, those attendant upon recent burns in particular. A poultice is made also of the more tender leaves, mixed with polenta, for bites inflicted by dogs. The juice of the elder, used as a fomentation, reduces abscesses of the brain, and more particularly of the membrane which envelopes that organ. The berries, which have not so powerful an action as the other parts

of the tree, stain the hair. Taken in doses of one acetabulum, in drink, they are diuretic. The softer leaves are eaten with oil and salt, to carry off pituitous and bilious secretions. The smaller kind is for all these purposes the more efficacious of the two. A decoction of the root in wine, taken in doses of two cyathi, brings away the water in dropsy, and acts emolliently upon the uterus: the same effects are produced also by a sitting-bath made of a decoction of the leaves. The tender shoots of the cultivated kind, boiled in a saucepan and eaten as food, have a purgative effect: the leaves taken in wine, neutralize the venom of serpents. An application of the young shoots, mixed with he-goat suet, is remarkably good for gout; and if they are macerated in water, the infusion will destroy fleas. If a decoction of the leaves is sprinkled about a place, it will exterminate flies. “Boa” is the name given to a malady which appears in the form of red pimples upon the body; for its cure the patient is scourged with a branch of elder. The inner bark, pounded and taken with white wine, relaxes the bowels.⁷

Also note, while the literature of the time primarily concerns itself with elder as medicine, its many other uses were well known and appreciated. For instance, even Pliny appears to have commented on elderberry’s use for whistles and popguns, one that endured deep into American history. Also, he is one of the earliest to record elderberry’s use as a hair dye.⁸ These early works and studies on elderberry set the stage for most of the rest of its history and use—direct quotations and echoes of their work will appear in almost all writings on elderberry to this day.

The modern names for the tree also have Greco-Roman roots. Elder comes from *aeld* or *ellarn*, a word that meant “to kindle or fire.” Its long hollow stems are excellent for blowing air into a fire from a distance. Greek mythology shows that it may be one of the earliest uses of the plant. Prometheus, who gave the gift of fire to humanity, is said to have carried his gift in a hollowed-out branch, a branch that was perhaps fashioned from the elder.



▲ The elder's habit of growing twisted and tangled led to its association with ill luck and misfortune.

EUROPEAN ELDERBERRY

While Greco-Roman culture and influence waxed and waned, the centrality of elderberry as a useful medicine has endured right up until modern times. The peasant's medicine chest had real staying power. At the same time, elderberry was deeply entwined in the superstitions and religious scruples of the different countries where it grew.

While esteemed for its healing properties, elder was also viewed with skepticism and fear. It didn't help that Judas Iscariot was said to have hanged himself from an elder tree, a story some say was invented to discourage tree worship, especially of the elder. The old rhyme, "Bour tree, bour tree, crooked, wrong, / Never straight and never strong, Never bush and never tree, / Since our Lord was nailed on thee," is just one of many examples of how elder became entwined with negative associations.⁹

Such myths expanded over time in Europe, where the wood of the elder became associated with witches, ill luck, and bad omens in many countries. In Shakespeare's play *Cymbeline*, elderberry appears as a symbol of sadness and grief.¹⁰ Yet, Shakespeare also shows the great esteem elderberry was held in by the people when one of his characters compares it to the greatest healers of antiquity: "What says my Aesculapius? my Galen? my heart of Elder?" (*Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act II, Sc. 3).

It is here, in European history, that we find what is most likely the earliest recorded mention of the use of elderberry juice to increase resistance to illness, from German scholar Conrad von Megenberg (1309–1374).

Many books were written about elder's properties across Europe. Their titles match the great esteem the plant had received for the past 1,000 years. One of the most noteworthy is *The Anatomy of the Elder Cutting Out of It Plain, Approved, and Specific Remedies for Most and Chiefest Maladies: Confirmed and Cleared by Reason, Experience, and History* by Martin Blochwich. Written in 1644, it is probably the earliest work devoted solely to elder's medical use. In it, he draws heavily on the writings of those mentioned above but adds a great deal more to the already extensive discussion of elderberry—the book tallies over 250 pages!

If the medicinal properties of its leaves, bark and berries were fully known, I cannot tell what our countryman could ail for which he might not fetch a remedy from every hedge, either for sickness, or wounds.¹¹

JOHN EVELYN

Also, elder wasn't just for the learned. It was truly "the medicine chest of the country people"—an appellation we can first credit to 16th-century doctor, Michael Ettmeuller.¹²

It is of no surprise that, alongside technical treatises on the plant, we find fairy tales and other fanciful stories, folk remedies, traditional recipes, and dozens of other uses. The 1852 *Flora Homoeopathica* recounts, “It was the chief ingredient in Lady Mary Douglas’s specific; and Elder-flower water and Elder-flower ointment were in every domestic medicine case; the North American Indians make an eye-water from the young leaves of the Elder.”¹³

On the fairy-tale side, one of the most memorable, and accessible, is that of “The Elder-Tree Mother” by Hans Christian Andersen. While mainly known for tales such as “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” “The Little Mermaid,” and “The Ugly Duckling,” he also included one about the elder:



▲
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
In the Midst of the Tree Sat a Kindly
Old Woman, by Arthur Rackham.
England, 1939
From *The Little Elder Tree Mother*

And the little boy looked toward the teapot. He saw the lid slowly raise itself and fresh white elder flowers come forth from it. They shot long branches even out of the spout and spread them abroad in all directions, and they grew bigger and bigger until there was the most glorious elderbush—really a big tree! The branches even stretched to the little boy’s bed and thrust the curtains aside—how fragrant its blossoms were! And right in the middle of the tree there sat a sweet-looking old woman in a very strange dress. It was green, as green as the leaves of the elder tree, and it was trimmed with big white elder blossoms; at first one couldn’t tell if this dress was cloth or the living green and flowers of the tree.

“What is this woman’s name?” asked the little boy.

“Well, the Romans and the Greeks,” said the old man, “used to call her a ‘Dryad,’ but we don’t understand that word. Out in New Town, where the sailors live, they have a better name for her. There she is called ‘Elder Tree Mother,’ and you must pay attention to her; listen to her, and look at that glorious elder tree!”¹⁴

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN “*The Little Elder Tree Mother*”

The association of elder with magic spanned countries and cultures in Europe. Lady Northcote, who in 1903 wrote *The Book of Herbs*, collected dozens of pieces of lore around the elder. Summing up many hundreds of years of European history, she writes, “Every inch of the Elder-tree is connected with magic.”¹⁵

Some of these myths and stories are quite serious, while others, rather humorous. For instance, one recounts how elder was the perfect wood for making stakes to use against vampires—a serious fear in parts of Europe for some two hundred years. Another, drawing on the legend that vampires must compulsively count all things—an idea that I was exposed to as a child by the television show *Sesame Street*—said to leave the berries on your windowsill. A vampire seeking to enter your residence would be kept preoccupied until morning tallying the berries before they could enter. Two forms of defense from a single plant!

Nicholas Culpeper, a doctor in England in the 1600s, also points to how well established the elder was in common knowledge. His work, along with that of Sauer, were the go-to home remedy books for over a hundred years in parts of Europe and the United States.

Culpeper notes that “*Elder flowers*, help dropsies, cleanse the blood, clear the skin, open stoppings of the liver and spleen, and diseases arising therefrom.”

Rob Baccarum Sambuci or Rob of Elder Berries

College.] Take of the juice of Elder Berries, and make it thick with the help of a gentle fire, either by itself, or a quarter of its weight in sugar being added.

Culpeper.] Both Rob of Elder Berries, and Dwarf-Elder, are excellent for such whose bodies are inclining to dropsies, neither let them neglect nor despise it. They may take the quantity of a nutmeg each morning, it will gently purge the watery humour.¹⁷

This rob—a rob is a thick, heavily reduced juice and sweetener—was sometimes added to warm water or tea and taken for coughs, colds, and flu. It is in some ways the predecessor to our modern elderberry syrups.

I hold it needless to write any description of this, since every boy that plays with a pop-gun will not mistake another tree instead of Elder.¹⁶

NICHOLAS CULPEPER

Culpeper also notes elder's effectiveness for treating toothache:

8. For the Tooth-Ache

Take the inner rind of an Elder-tree, and bruise it, and put thereto a little Pepper, and make it into balls, and hold them between the teeth that ache.

Elder wasn't just a home remedy, though. Numerous products were made using elder and elderberry, from non-alcoholic beverage to body care.

John Parkinson (1567–1650) was apothecary to James I and a founding member of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries. He is celebrated for his two monumental works, the first *Paradisi in Sole Paradisus Terrestris* in 1629 (a gardening book), but the second was his *Theatrum Botanicum* of 1644, one of the largest herbals ever produced. A portion of this book was dedicated entirely to the virtues of the elder tree, wherein the author sings its praises in no less than 230 pages. That portion of the book became so popular that a booklet of that section was published in several editions in both English and Latin. Every single part of the plant was mentioned as medicinally useful. Its medicinal powers were deemed effective for treating quinsy (peritonsillar abscesses), sore throats, and strangulation. The elderberries were also used for practically any ailment, “from toothache to the plague.” It seems like a whole apothecary could be stocked solely from the many preparations that could be made from its various parts. The list is quite exhaustive—syrup, tincture, mixture, oil, ointment, concoction, liniment, extract, salt, conserve, vinegar, oxymel, sugar, decoction, bath, cataplasm, and powder made from one, several, or all parts of the plant.¹⁸

“The people’s medicine chest” was still going strong in the early 1800s. *The American Frugal Housewife*, written by Lydia Child in 1835, speaks of the many uses of elder, not just as drink or medicine but also as insect repellent and plant protection. Echoing earlier works, she says of the elder: “Every part of it serves some useful purpose—the wood, pith, bark, leaves, buds, flowers, and fruit.”¹⁹

In 1895, *The Cottage Physician: Best Known Methods of Treatment in All Diseases, Accidents and Emergencies of the Home*, by Dr. Thomas Faulkner and Dr. John H. Carmichael, said of elderberry that it was a “rather laxative and also act[s] upon the skin. They are often used in treating rheumatism, gout, scrofula and habitual constipation.” The elder—mainly as flower—is mentioned around a dozen times, for such disparate ailments as earaches, eye issues, constipation, bone ulcers, measles, and dropsy.²⁰

In its reference section, instructions include how to make a diaphoretic decoction (a herbal or medicine that induces sweating) using 1 to 2 tablespoons of elderflowers steeped in water. Decoctions are similar to teas, and the manual even mentions the addition of honey in some situations. “From one to four tablespoons of the expressed juice of the inner bark of the elder, taken every four hours, till it operates freely, is of great service.”²¹

The culinary value of elderberry was not lost as time progressed, either. It was especially valued in winemaking, with many recipes for both the flowers and berries continually circulated throughout Europe and America for hundreds of years.

438. To Make Elder-Flower Wine

Take three or four handfuls of dry’d elder-flowers, and ten gallons of spring water, boil the water, and pour in scalding hot upon the flowers, the next day put to every gallon of water five pounds of Malaga raisins, the stalks being first pick’d off, but not wash’d, chop them grosly with a chopping knife, then put them into your boiled water, stir the water, raisins and flowers well together, and do so twice a day for twelve days, then press out the juice clear as long

JUNE 29, 1924 THE CHEMIST AND DRUGGIST 23

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You probably shared in the increased sales due to our advertising of Glynoid Jelly; we expect as good if not better results for Sambuline. Sambuline retails readily at 1/6 a tube, the price to you being 12/- a dozen net.

With every opening order for 4-doz. 1/6 tubes we will send 3 doz. trial tubes free, and with subsequent orders for 4-doz. tubes to trial tubes.

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It has a soothing and healing effect, rapidly cooling the burning hot skin, and preventing unsightly peeling or painful blistering. Neither sticky nor greasy it is nicely perfumed, and will not stain the daintiest fabric. Sambuline protects the skin from all insect bites.

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▲ THE CHEMIST AND DRUGGIST, 1924. ARCHIVE.ORG

xiv THE CHEMIST AND DRUGGIST. SUPPLEMENT. Nov. 24, 1889.

HIGHEST AWARDS AT THE INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION, LONDON, 1883.

BECKETT'S FRUIT SYRUPS & CORDIALS

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BECKETT'S FRUIT SYRUPS AND CORDIALS are made from the finest quality fruit and sugar, and are guaranteed to be pure and delicious. They are sold by all Chemists and Druggists, and are highly recommended for the relief of all ailments of the throat and chest.

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▲ THE CHEMIST AND DRUGGIST, 1889. ARCHIVE.ORG

as you can get any liquor; put it into a barrel fit for it, stop it up two or three days till it works, and in a few days stop it up close, and let it stand two or three months, then bottle it.²²

Indeed, it is hard to find any book about winemaking that didn't include the elder! Most older cookbooks and winemaking guides contained at a minimum two, with many having four or more recipes that include elderflowers or berries. But wine alone wasn't on the menu. Works spanning the 1400s and onward include directions for elderberry brandy, mead, and cordials, along with jams and jellies. A few even include rather unique dishes, such as elderberry soup.

I would be remiss to not mention my favorite reference to elderberry in more recent European literature: Monty Python's "Your mother was a hamster, and your father smells of elderberry." Tragedy, comedy, poetry, even deft insult is all a part of elder's rich history and lore.

NATIVE AMERICAN AND AMERICAN ELDERBERRY

Elderberry's history in North America is not as well known but no less rich than in Europe. The Native Americans made use of elderberry far back into their histories. Indeed, elderberry was present at the beginning of history:

The Birth of Wek'-Wek and the Creation of Man

Its branches, as they swayed in the wind, made a sweet musical sound. The tree sang; it sang all the time, day and night, and the song was good to hear. Wik'-wek looked and listened and wished he could have the tree. Near by he saw two Hol-luk'-ki or Star-people, and as he looked he perceived that they were the Hul-lukmi-yum'-ko—the great and beautiful women-chiefs of the Star-people. One was the Morning Star, the other Pleiades Os-so-so'-li. They were watching and working close by the elderberry tree. Wek'-wek liked the music and asked the Star-women about it. They told him that the tree whistled songs that kept them awake all day and all night so

they could work all the time and never grow sleepy. They had the rattlesnakes to keep the birds from carrying off the elderberries.²³

To the various native tribes, the elderberry was associated with trustworthiness and honesty:

On this journey some of the personal delegation to communicate with Hiawatha used for a pledge small shoots from the elderberry bush which were cut into short pieces, and from which the pith was removed, and those little cylinders strung on small cords of sinew. Likewise, the tradition continues, the quills of large feathers, cut and strung on cords, were also used as tokens, pledges, or vouches for the good faith of the messenger or speaker.²⁴

Elder's use in the Americas is as old or older than in European and Mediterranean peoples—archeologists have recovered its seeds dating between 1000 to 1300 BC at various Native American sites. One of the world's earliest on-the-go snack bars—pemmican, a mixture of bison or beef fat and dried, finely pounded meat—would sometimes include elderberries. Most other uses found in America mirror those of Europe: musical instruments and other hand tools, beverages of many kinds, and even clusters of flowers battered and fried developed among the Native Americans, just as among the Greco-Roman cultures. The medicinal uses also closely mirrored those practiced on the other side of the world—treatment for fevers, purgatives, the bark for wounds, sores, and other skin ailments; every part of the plant was prized medicine.²⁵

The colonists brought some European cultivars over, but also quickly learned to make use of the native elder found across the continent. It is hard to find a culinary or medicinal text from the first 150 years of US history that doesn't mention elder. During the Civil War, along with many other native plants, the elder was relied on heavily by both Union and Confederates. As the war carried on, medicines became scarce, especially in the South, so soldiers and physicians

began to fall back on herbal lore and whatever plants the landscape provided:

I enumerate a few more medicinal uses that were made of some of the products of our Southern fields and forests by our physicians and housewives . . . A decoction made by pouring boiling water over the leaves, flowers or berries of the elder bush was used as a wash for wounds to prevent injuries from flies.²⁶

Because of its color and flavor, elderberry was sometimes also used as an adulterate (not necessarily in the modern negative sense of the word) in wines and other beverages, so well-trained barkeepers, buyers, and butlers were taught how to detect its presence.²⁷

MORE THAN JUST FOOD OR MEDICINE

While elderberry has a long, rich, and deep history of culinary and medicinal use, the plant was prized for many other purposes as well. The word *elder* is thought to come from or be related to the old word *aeld*, meaning “fire or wind.” Some of the earliest recorded uses are as bellows for blowing air into a fire along with musical instruments. Indeed, the Greek and Latin root for elder, *sambu*, appears to have originally referred to a flute-like instrument made from elder wood.

Elderberry was often used as a dye for fabrics but wasn’t limited solely to paints and clothing. It also works as a food dye, such as for coloring things like Easter eggs or cake frosting. People also used elderberry as a hair dye, for complexion and skin, and as makeup.²⁹ If you deal with elderberry on a regular basis, you will quickly realize that, even if it doesn’t heal everything it touches, it will stain it!

Because of its beauty and growth habit, for at least 2,000 years, people have used elderberry in landscaping and homestead design; similar to flutes and popguns, it is mentioned all the way back in Greco-Roman times. It is one of the earliest plants used by people to create what are now sometimes called “living fences.” In the *Systematic Agriculture: The Mystery of Husbandry Discovered*, written by

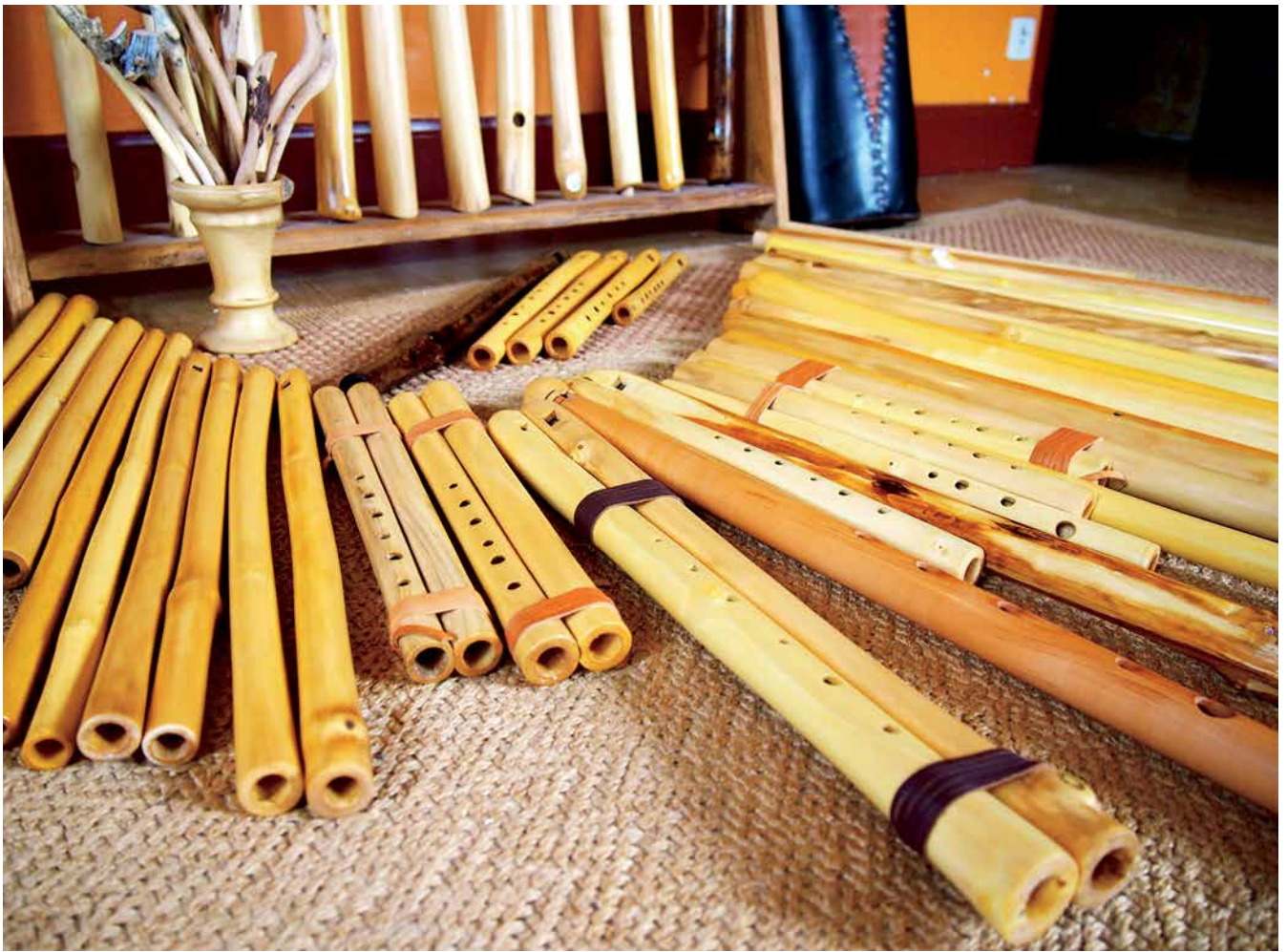


▲ Elder create wonderful screens and hedges. *CHERIE MCDIFFETT, RUSTIC ACRES FARM*

John Worlidge around 1675, the elder is included with “trees necessary and proper for fencing and enclosing of Lands”:

A considerable Fence may be made of Elder, set of reasonable hasty Truncheons, like the Willow and may be laid with great curiosity: this makes a speedy shelter for a garden from Winds, Beasts and such like injuries, rather than from rude minchers.³⁰

Because of the plant’s toxic components, a number of antifungal and natural pesticides have been made from it. For instance, elderberry leaves were laid near the heads of bedridden patients to keep away flies.³¹ The juice of the plant was used to ward off pests on certain crops. The elder was also used to treat various ailments in livestock, generally following the same principles for treating people.



▲ An assortment of elder flutes in many styles and sizes. MAX BRUMBERG, BRUMBERG FLUTES

In the mid-1900s, elderberry, like many traditional foods, medicinal, and herbals, lost ground to the age of antibiotics. But one reason you picked up this book is because elderberry has regained so much ground over the past decade; interest in the plant is probably the highest it has been in a hundred years. So now that we are more familiar with elder's story, let's look at how to make it a part of ours.

well.

Oil of Elder Leaves

For the treatment of bruises, wounds, &c., take one part of the leaves of the common elderberry and three parts of good linseed oil, and boil gently till the leaves are quite crispy, and the oil is then pressed out and again heated with more leaves till it becomes quite green. This is much used by veterinary surgeons.

Herbs and flowers. Levant wormseed, cloves, poplar, lavender, elderberry, mullein, calendula, safflower, arnica, chamomile (Roman and German), insect flowers (Persian and Dalmatian, cusso, lily-of-the-valley, Irish moss, Iceland moss, cannabis, clover, pulsatilla, adonis, broom, galega, melilot, eupatorium, grindelia, tansy, wormwood, mugwort, lobelia, peppermint, spearmint, marjoram, thyme, American pennyroyal, horehound, catnip, skullcap, chiretta, centaury, helianthemum, euphorbia pilulifera, drosera, verbena

Oil of Elder-flowers. *Syn.* WHITE OIL OF ELDER; OLEUM SAMBUCI ALBUM, O. SAMBUCINUM (P. Cod.), L. *Prep.* From the flowers, as OIL OF CHAMOMILE. Emollient and discutive.

Oil of Elder-leaves. *Syn.* GREEN OIL, GREEN OIL OF ELDER, OIL OF SWALLOWS; OLEUM VIRIDE, O. SAMBUCI VIRIDE, L. *Prep.* 1. Green elder leaves, 1 lb.; olive oil, 1 quart; boil gently until the leaves are crisp, press out the oil, and again heat it till it turns green.

2. As before, but by maceration, at a heat under 212° Fahr. More odorous than the last.

3. Elder leaves, 1 cwt.; linseed oil, 3 cwt.; as No. 1.

Obs. The last form is the one usually employed on the large scale. It is generally coloured with verdigis, $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. to the cwt., just before putting it into the casks, and whilst still warm; as, without great skill and a very large quantity of leaves, the deep-green colour so much admired by the ignorant cannot be given to it. The oil is got from the leaves by allowing them to drain in the pan or boiler (with a cock at the bottom), kept well heated. Emollient; in great repute among the vulgar as a liniment, in a variety of affections.

◀ Old books explore the use of elder for both people and animals. *WRINKLES AND NOTIONS FOR EVERY HOUSEHOLD*, 1890, ARCHIVE.ORG

◀ A page from the 1913 American Pharmacological Society Syllabus. ARCHIVE.ORG

◀ COOLEY'S CYCLOPAEDIA, 1880, ARCHIVE.ORG