

Elderberries

Keys for Success

Avoid disturbing the shallow root system.

Prune to remove canes more than four years old.

Plants tolerate a wide range of soils and are relatively pest free.

Elderberries are popular for their unusual taste in pies, jellies, and jams. They are occasionally used in making wine. The plants are very hardy (usually in areas no colder than Zone 4 but some kinds in Zone 3), and because they flower in late June, the crop is seldom damaged by a late spring frost. They are attractive and easy to grow and are great in landscape plantings. Elderberries contain more phosphorus and potassium than any other temperate fruit crop. The fruits also are rich in vitamin C.

Choosing Cultivars

Elderberries belong to the genus *Sambucus*. Individual flowers are small and white and appear in large compound clusters. They are nearly self-unfruitful, so plant two different cultivars within 60 feet of each other to provide adequate cross-pollination.

Adams No. 1 and Adams No. 2 are two old cultivars introduced by the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in 1926. They are strong, vigorous, productive, and hardy in areas up to Zone 4, and they bear large fruit clusters. They also ripen late, with fruit maturing in early September. Other cultivars with large clusters and berries include York, Johns, Kent, Nova, and Scotia. York is somewhat more productive than the Adams series, and the berries tend to be larger.

Planting

Elderberries grow best in moist, fertile, well-drained soil with a pH between 5.5 and 6.5. But they will tolerate a wide range of soil texture, fertility, and acidity. It's a myth that they prefer swampy areas. In fact, they do not tolerate poor drainage.

Plant elderberries in the spring as soon as possible after they arrive from the nursery to prevent plants from drying out. Space plants 6 to 10 feet apart. Elderberries are shallow rooted, so keep them well watered during the first season.

Plants are easy to propagate from hardwood cuttings taken when plants are dormant.

Fertilizing

Elderberries respond well to fertilization. In addition to incorporating manure or compost before planting, apply additional fertilizer annually in early

spring. Apply 1/8 pound of ammonium nitrate (or 1/2 pound of 10-10-10) for each year of the plant's age, up to 1 pound per plant (or up to 4 pounds 10-10-10).

Weed Control

The most difficult problem you will face when growing elderberries is weed control. Because they have shallow roots, do not cultivate deeper than 2 inches. After the first year, it is best to avoid disturbing the soil at all because the slightest injury can damage the fibrous root system or kill one of the new upright shoots. To control weeds without disturbing the elderberry roots, use a combination of pulling weeds by hand—especially while they are still small—and mowing and mulching. Once you develop a thick hedgerow of plants, elderberries can suppress weeds quite well.

Avoid disturbing the soil, because the shallow root system is easily damaged.

Pruning

Elderberries send up many new canes each year. The canes usually reach full height in one season and develop lateral branches in the second. Flowers and fruit develop on the tips of the current season's growth—often on the new canes but especially on laterals.

Second-year elderberry canes with good lateral development are the most fruitful. In the third or fourth year, older wood tends to lose vigor and become weak. In late winter to early spring while the plants are dormant, remove all dead, broken, or weak canes plus all canes more than three years old. Leave an equal number of one-, two-, and three-year-old canes.

Diseases and Insects

Elderberry plants are generally free of pests, which makes them great for landscape plantings. Powdery mildew is a problem in some years, especially when it affects the fruit. Cane borers occasionally cause damage but are usually not present in large numbers. Pruning out infested canes is the best remedy for home gardeners.

Harvest

Harvest elderberries in late August through early September, depending on the cultivar. When ripe, the entire fruit cluster should be removed and the berries stripped from the cluster for use. Uncooked berries have a dark purple juice and are astringent and inedible. Use the fruit as soon as possible or keep it at a cool temperature for later use. It is difficult to transport elderberries because the fruits fall off the cluster during transit.