

BELL COUNTY MASTER GARDENER  
“Tip of the Week”  
By Beverly Wickersham  
“ELDERBERRY”: 2013 Herb of the Year”

Elderberry is a perennial shrub or small tree that is cultivated for its edible purple-black berries. It is a member of the Honeysuckle family (Caprifoliaceae) and is also known as “American Elder,” “Sweet Elder,” and “Mother Elder.” Different species of the Elderberry (or Elder) are found growing in East and Central Texas as well as the Trans-Pecos area and in the Chisos Mountains. It tolerates a variety of soils, but lush growth is encouraged by moist soils along streams and low places. Elderberry may be planted year round in full sun to light shade. Its height can vary for 5 feet to as much as 12 feet if planted in a damp location. Be warned that it has a tendency to spread and take over an area. In the suburban landscape, it is best planted in the marginal areas of property with hackberries and mulberries. There it can provide abundant food for birds and many other wildlife species.

In the spring, the plant bears numerous white umbel-like flowers known as “elderblow.” In the language of herbs, Elderberry flowers symbolize compassion and sympathy. The flower heads will produce a musky wine that is said to be a “cure all.” The flowers are then followed by clustered purple-black berries in early summer. Early American settlers used the ripe berries to make ketchup, vinegar, and chutney, as well as jelly and pies if they could harvest the berries before the songbirds, squirrels, raccoons, mice, rabbits, and deer gobbled them up!

Although the bark, roots, leaves, and unripe berries are toxic, Elderberries have been used in folk remedies for centuries in Europe, Western Asia, North Africa, and North America. A tea made from the inner bark was used as a diuretic, a strong laxative, and emetic as well as a poultice for cuts, sore or swollen limbs, and boils to relieve pain and swelling. The poultice was also used for its known antioxidant activity to lower cholesterol, to improve vision, to boost the immune system, to improve heart health, and for coughs, colds, flu, bacterial and viral infections, and tonsillitis. As you can see, it is a very versatile plant.

I hope you can find a place in your yard for this historically useful plant, if only for the sake of the wildlife. Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact [ask.bcmga@gmail.com](mailto:ask.bcmga@gmail.com)

