**Sambucus canadensis: American Elder**

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**Introduction**

A fast-growing deciduous shrub, American elder suckers quite easily and is often seen as a broad, spreading, multistemmed plant with bright green, pinnately compound, 12- to 14-inch-long leaves arranged along the arching branches. But it can be effectively pruned into a nice, small, single or multi-stemmed, small, flowering tree but needs regular pruning to remove suckers growing from the base of the plant. In early summer (northern part of its range) or sporadically all year long (in USDA hardiness zones 9 and 10), American elder is literally smothered with 6- to 10-inch-wide clusters of yellowish-white blooms. These are followed by a multitude of small, dark purple berries which are quite popular with birds, and can be used in pies, jellies, or fermented to make a wine. Some reference books refer to *Sambucus simpsonii* as a separate species, but this is probably a southern extension of *Sambucus canadensis*.

**Availability:** somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

**Description**

- **Height:** 8 to 12 feet
- **Spread:** 6 to 10 feet
- **Crown uniformity:** irregular
- **Crown shape:** round
- **Crown density:** open
- **Growth rate:** moderate
- **Texture:** fine

**Foliage**

- **Leaf arrangement:** opposite/subopposite
- **Leaf type:** odd-pinnately compound

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Leaf margin: serrate
Leaf shape: elliptic (oval), lanceolate
Leaf venation: pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: deciduous
Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches, 4 to 8 inches
Leaf color: green
Fall color: yellow
Fall characteristic: not showy

Other
Roots: not a problem
Winter interest: no
Outstanding tree: no
Ozone sensitivity: sensitive
Verticillium wilt susceptibility: susceptible
Pest resistance: resistant to pests/diseases

Use and Management
Ideal for use in naturalized landscapes where it will tolerate acid or alkaline soil and even some drought, American elder performs best in full sun on moist to wet, fertile soils. Plant it in the shrub border or locate it next to the patio for a wonderful flower display. The plant is often overlooked by the trade perhaps because it is so commonly found in and along the woods, but it has a place in the garden, although its rather random habit may not make it popular in the commercial landscape. Requires pruning to create a neat small tree.

A few cultivars include: ‘Acutiloba’, leaflets very deeply divided, a nice fine-textured plant; ‘Aurea’, bright red fruit, yellow leaves; ‘Adams’, fruits in dense, large clusters, excellent for baking. There are a variety of other very attractive species.

Propagation is by seed or cuttings.

Pests
Borers, occasional leaf-chewing insects, may infest this tree.

Diseases
American elder can be infected by cankers, leaf spots, powdery mildew.

Figure 2. Range

Flower
Flower color: white/cream/gray
Flower characteristics: showy

Fruit
Fruit shape: round
Fruit length: less than .5 inch
Fruit covering: fleshy
Fruit color: purple, black
Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; showy; fruit/leaves not a litter problem

Trunk and Branches
Trunk/bark/branches: branches droop; not showy; typically multi-trunked; thorns
Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure
Breakage: susceptible to breakage
Current year twig color: gray
Current year twig thickness: thick
Wood specific gravity: unknown

Culture
Light requirement: full sun
Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; alkaline; acidic; extended flooding; well-drained
Drought tolerance: moderate
Aerosol salt tolerance: low