

Sambucus canadensis: American Elder¹

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Introduction

A fast-growing deciduous shrub, American Elder suckers quite easily and is often seen as a broad, spreading, multi-stemmed 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*.

General Information

Scientific name: *Sambucus canadensis*

Pronunciation: sam-BEW-kuss kan-uh-DEN-sis

Common name(s): American Elder, Common Elder

Family: *Caprifoliaceae*

USDA hardiness zones: 4A through 10B (Fig. 2)

Origin: native to North America

Invasive potential: weedy native

Uses: container or planter; reclamation; trained as a standard; deck or patio; specimen

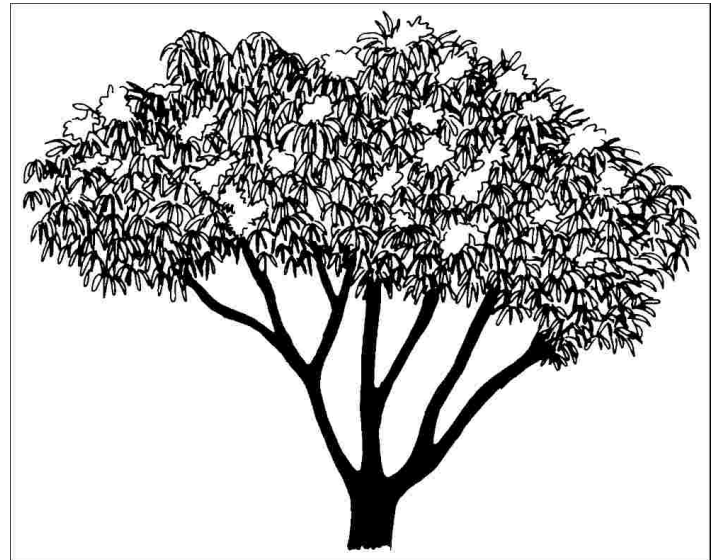


Figure 1. Mature *Sambucus canadensis*: American Elder

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

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Figure 2. Range

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: opposite/subopposite (Fig. 3)

Leaf type: odd-pinnately compound

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

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

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.