**Sambucus canadensis ‘Aurea’: ‘Aurea’ American Elder**

Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson

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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 yellow leaves arranged along the arching branches. But it can be effectively pruned into a nice, small, single or multi-stemmed 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 zone 9), American elder is literally smothered with 6- to 10-inch-wide clusters of yellowish-white blooms. These are followed by a multitude of small, cherry red berries which are quite popular with birds, and can be used in pies, jellies, or fermented to make a wine.

**General Information**

- **Scientific name:** Sambucus canadensis
- **Pronunciation:** sam-BEW-kuss kan-uh-DEN-sis
- **Common name(s):** ‘Aurea’ American elder, ‘Aurea’ common elder
- **Family:** Caprifoliaceae
- **USDA hardiness zones:** 4A through 11 (Fig. 2)
- **Origin:** native to North America
- **Invasive potential:** weedy native
- **Uses:** container or planter; reclamation; trained as a standard; deck or patio; specimen
- **Availability:** somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

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Figure 1. Mature *Sambucus canadensis* ‘Aurea’: ‘Aurea’ American Elder

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Figure 2. Range

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**Description**

Height: 8 to 13 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  
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: yellow  
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: red  
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; acidic; alkaline; well-drained; extended flooding  
Drought tolerance: moderate  
Aerosol salt tolerance: unknown

**Other**

Roots: not a problem  
Winter interest: no  
Outstanding tree: no  
Ozone sensitivity: unknown  
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 would 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; ‘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.