Sambucus mexicana: Mexican Elder

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Introduction
Mexican elder is a semi-evergreen small tree, reaching up to 30 feet in height. Most open-grown specimens do not reach this height as they grow wider than tall. The light green, thick, leathery, pinnately compound leaves are often browsed by deer and livestock. The four to eight-inch-wide, flat cymes of yellow/white blooms appear mainly from April to June but in its native habitat may also occur at various times throughout the year after heavy rains. The small, blue/black fruits which follow the blooms are quite popular with birds and can be used to make wine or pies, and were reportedly even dried by Indians to be used at a later time. Fruits appear white because they are covered with a thick, waxy coating. A dye can be made from the stems and has been used to color baskets.

General Information
Scientific name: Sambucus mexicana
Pronunciation: sam-BEW-kuss meck-sih-KAY-nuh
Common name(s): Mexican elder
Family: Caprifoliaceae
USDA hardiness zones: 7B through 10B (Fig. 2)
Origin: native to North America
Invasive potential: little invasive potential
Uses: reclamation; deck or patio; specimen; highway median
Availability: not native to North America

Figure 1. Mature Sambucus mexicana: Mexican elder
Credits: Ed Gilman, UF/IFAS

Description
Height: 15 to 25 feet
Spread: 25 to 35 feet
Crown uniformity: symmetrical
Crown shape: weeping, round
Crown density: moderate
Growth rate: slow
Texture: fine

**Foliage**

- Leaf arrangement: opposite/subopposite (Fig. 3)
- Leaf type: odd-pinnately compound, trifoliate
- Leaf margin: serrate
- Leaf shape: ovate, elliptic (oval)
- Leaf venation: pinnate
- Leaf type and persistence: semi-evergreen
- Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches
- Leaf color: green
- Fall color: no color change
- Fall characteristic: not showy

![Figure 3. Foliage](image)

**Flower**

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

**Fruit**

- Fruit shape: round
- Fruit length: less than .5 inch
- Fruit covering: fleshy
- Fruit color: black, white/gray
- Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem

**Trunk and Branches**

- Trunk/bark/branches: branches droop; showy; typically multi-trunked; thorns
- Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure
- Breakage: susceptible to breakage
- Current year twig color: green, brown
- Current year twig thickness: thick
- Wood specific gravity: unknown

**Culture**

- Light requirement: full sun
- Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; acidic; alkaline; well-drained
- Drought tolerance: high
- Aerosol salt tolerance: unknown

**Other**

- Roots: not a problem
- Winter interest: yes
- Outstanding tree: yes
- Ozone sensitivity: sensitive
- Verticillium wilt susceptibility: susceptible
- Pest resistance: free of serious pests and diseases

**Use and Management**

Trees are best located in the open where they can develop their low, wide-spreading, uniform crown. It might be planted near a patio, or as a small shade tree in a backyard garden but the dropping fruit can be messy on brick, concrete and other hard surfaces. Young trees often require training and pruning to speed formation of a uniform crown. Save the more upright branches and remove the drooping ones to create greater clearance beneath the canopy.

Mexican elder should be grown in full sun on well-drained soil.

Propagation is by seed.

**Pests and Diseases**

No pests or diseases of major concern.