

Sambucus nigra ssp. *canadensis*: Elderberry¹

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Introduction

A fast-growing deciduous shrub, elderberry suckers quite easily and is often seen as a broad, spreading, multi-stemmed plant with bright green, pinnately compound, 6- to 10-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), elderberry 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 nigra* ssp. *canadensis*

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

Common name(s): elderberry, American elder, common elder

Family: *Adoxaceae*

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

Origin: native to the eastern half of the United States and southeastern Canada

UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status: weedy native

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



Figure 1. Full Form—*Sambucus nigra* ssp. *canadensis*: elderberry

Description

Height: 5 to 12 feet, and thicket-forming

Spread: 6 to 10 feet

Crown uniformity: irregular

Crown shape: round

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Crown density: open
Growth rate: moderate
Texture: fine

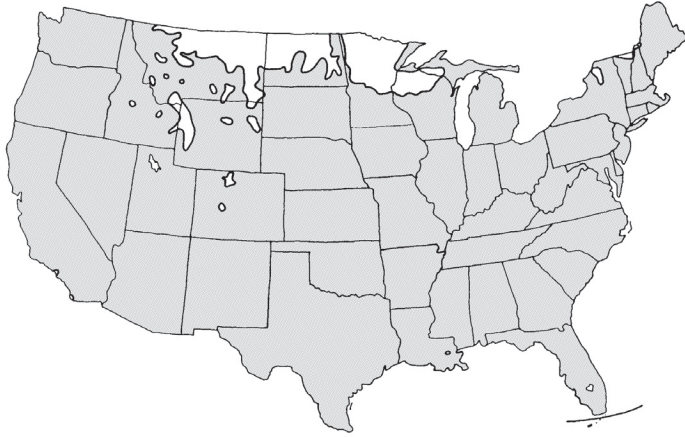


Figure 2. Range

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: opposite/subopposite
Leaf type: odd-pinnately compound; made up of 7 to 11 leaflets
Leaf margin: serrate
Leaf shape: elliptic (oval), lanceolate
Leaf venation: pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: deciduous
Leaf blade length: 6 to 10 inches; leaflets are 2 to 6 inches
Leaf color: dark green on top, paler green underneath
Fall color: yellow
Fall characteristic: not showy



Figure 3. Leaf—*Sambucus nigra* ssp. *canadensis*: elderberry

Flower

Flower color: white
Flower characteristics: showy; emerge in clusters on flat-topped cymes
Flowering: late spring to early summer



Figure 4. Flower—*Sambucus nigra* ssp. *canadensis*: elderberry

Fruit

Fruit shape: round
Fruit length: ¼ inch
Fruit covering: fleshy drupe
Fruit color: green to purplish black
Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; showy; fruit/leaves not a litter problem
Fruiting: mid to late summer



Figure 5. Fruit—*Sambucus nigra* ssp. *canadensis*: elderberry

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/branches: branches droop; not showy; typically multi-trunked; no thorns

Bark: brown, smooth, and warty, becoming rough and shallowly furrowed with age

Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure

Breakage: susceptible to breakage

Current year twig color: gray

Current year twig thickness: thick

Wood specific gravity: unknown



Figure 6. Bark—*Sambucus nigra* ssp. *canadensis*: elderberry

Credits: Gitta Hasing

Culture

Light requirement: full sun to partial shade

Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; alkaline; acidic; wet soil; 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, elderberry 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

Elderberry can be infected by cankers, leaf spots, powdery mildew.

References

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