**Sambucus Canadensis or Nigra**

**North American Elder**

**Segment for Week of Jan 18, 2021**

This is Steve Ruleson bringing you information on shore friendly living and gardening from the Eastern Shore of Virginia Master Gardeners and Virginia Cooperative Extension. This week I will share a segment offered to us by Mary K. Scott, a certified herbalist from the banks of North Carolina. She begins with a quote from T. Elder Sachs: **“When you settle a piece of land, first plant an Elder tree, then make your home there.”**

Sambucus Canadensis, or North American Elder, is found all across the U.S. A member of the Adoxaceae family and genus Sambucus, this is a deciduous tree/shrub reaching up to 30 feet. It appreciates stream or ditch banks and can be found in the wild along hedgerows and the woodlands edge.

Surrounded by fascinating folklore, one can easily go down a rabbit hole exploring its mystique and allure. As the opening quote suggests, Elder is thought to be a protector of the Garden. I have found that it does well with generous compost and protection from salt air. It forms a nice clustering group over time from “root starts” and enjoys sun to partial shade, producing more berries in full sun.

Elder is revered as holy wood in some cultures. It is thought that Jesus’ cross was constructed from Elder. Small crosses were once fastened to stables to “keep all evil from the animals.” [[1]](#footnote-1) Gypsies refused to burn or cut the wood of Elder for fear of bad luck. Sicilians used it to ward off serpents and robbers[[2]](#footnote-2). In the British Isles they are still thought to be the home of elves. The traditions and folklore surrounding Elder makes this tree its own legend.

Known as the “medicine chest of the common people” all parts are considered medicinal. Extracts are found at apothecaries, and pharmacies such as Walgreens offer a syrup of the berries. Although all parts - leaf, root, berry, and bark - are medicinal, most herbalists in my circle enjoy the benefits of flower which hang like ornaments covered by honeybees and berries that attract up to 35 types of birds.

The flowers are delicious in cordials, elixirs such as honey and brandy extracts. There’s a constituent in elder that binds to “spikes” on the flu virus, preventing it from entering the body. I enlist its help as a diaphoretic and make a face cream by infusing the dried flowers in oil. Elderflowers are also found in cake recipes, such as the Royal wedding cake of Prince Harry and Meghan, which was Lemon Elderflower. Whole Foods offers an Elderflower Lemonade that is swoon worthy.

DELICIOUS, nutritious and immune boosting for pollinators, birds and humans; one cannot go wrong with the mystical Elder.

From my perch near the mouth of Occohannock Creek, I recorded xxx of rain last week.

For answers to Gardening questions call your local Accomack or Northampton County Extension Office. And for a written copy of this article, go to the ESVMG website.

1. A Modern Herbal-by Mrs. M. Grieve 1931 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A Modern Herbal-by Mrs. M. Grieve 1931 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)