



Honeybee enjoying white elderberry cyme (cluster of tiny flowers). Photo by Abby Perry.



Elderberries ripe for picking. Note the small size. Photo by Abby Perry.

Enjoy elegant elderberry blooms and edible products

Elderberries are a great multi-purpose plant that can tolerate Wyoming's harsh climate. They are enjoyed by pollinators and birds, make beautiful (and somewhat deer tolerant) additions to landscapes, and their berries can be used to make a wide variety of edible products. There is evidence of some of these uses going back to the Stone Age.

If you are looking for something a little different in your landscape with a lot of added benefits, elderberries may be just the ticket.

Growing elderberries

Elderberries are cold-hardy, vigorous plants—some varieties can tolerate temperatures as low as -40 degrees Fahrenheit. They can reach a maximum height of 12 feet and width of 6–8 feet. There are European and American elderberries, but American elderberries are most suitable for Wyoming's climate.

Deer resistance

There is a lot of encouraging evidence to suggest that elderberries are deer resistant, meaning that a deer may browse leaves, twigs, and fruit, but is less likely to devour the plant to the ground. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule, and fawns in particular seem more curious than adults in what they select. Putting up initial fencing that can be removed as the plant matures can be a good way to test for deer resistance in your specific area. Sometimes plants are also less palatable to deer after the initial year they are planted.

Also, keep in mind deer rub during the rut. A plant with many stems, or stems that have gone dormant, may rebound from rubbing just fine (since the plant predominately grows from the ground each year) but it's important to be aware of the potential risk.

Elderberries prefer a slightly acidic to neutral soil, but are still often successful in cultivated Wyoming landscapes (usually higher in pH) with well-drained soil. They prefer full sun but can tolerate partial sun if the other conditions are highly favorable.

Elderberry plants shouldn't be fertilized in their first year because fertilizers often encourage aboveground growth instead of the development of strong root mass. Elderberries primarily start back from the ground each year, but new growth does emerge from the stems in the spring as well. They can be some of the first woody plants to emerge and are an encouraging sign of the season to come.

The plant has tiny white flowers that make clusters called cymes; some clusters can be as large as a person's head and are quite striking. Typically, elderberries begin flowering in June with relatively long-lasting blooms that often remain through July. The flowers are also loved by pollinating insects. The flowers are replaced by berries that ripen from mid-August to mid-September.

Pruning

Although elderberries don't need to be pruned during their first couple of years, pruning is eventually an important part of their maintenance and success. Everyone prunes differently, but some pruning guidelines for elderberries include removing all the dead, broken, and weak canes annually in the spring. Canes that are three years old or older can also be removed. The older canes produce less fruit and can

Elderberry varieties

The following varieties are often available in nurseries (lowest suitable USDA cold hardiness zone noted) or online. Note that this might not be a complete list.

- **Adams:** Zone 3
- **York:** Zone 4
- **Johns:** Zone 3
- **Nova:** Zone 4
- **Ranch:** Zone 3
- **Bob Gordon:** Zone 3
- **Wyldewood:** Zone 3



Elderberry dupes (clusters of berries) cut with pruners and collected for more meticulous picking inside. Photo by Abby Perry.

be more susceptible to damage. By removing old canes, new and more robust growth is encouraged.

Because of this plant's vigor, sometimes pruning may be required to help maintain walking space or distance from other plants. To help mitigate this issue, keep the plant's mature size in mind when selecting a site.

Berry picking

Elderberry plants usually start producing fruit within three years of planting. Having a pollinator partner (usually another variety of elderberry) is recommended to help ensure good fruit set.

The berries are quite small, similar in size to half a pinky fingernail, so the harvesting process can be time consuming. The berries initially grow in green, but transition to a dark purple as they ripen. The ripening process typically takes 5–15 days. Ripe berries are often easier to pop off the stem and burst with a little more juice. Note that picking the berries can temporarily stain hands.

The flower clusters turn into clusters of berries called dupes. When harvesting, it is easier to cut the clusters with scissors or pruners, then remove the berries later. However, the berries can go bad quickly and should be refrigerated right away.

Eating elderberries

Uncooked elderberries should not be consumed. Uncooked berries, leaves, twigs, and seeds contain a cyanogenic compound, making them toxic. When picking the berries, remove as many stems as possible. Take your time and be meticulous.

Cooked berries are considered edible and can be used for a wide range of products like wine, juice, syrup, pies or crumbles, and fruit leather.



Elderberries after handpicking and removal from stem clusters prior to cooking on the stovetop. Photo by Abby Perry.

Finished syrup ready for refrigeration or freezing (it is not shelf stable). Photo by Abby Perry.

Elderberries are low in acid and therefore cannot be safely preserved using standard home-canning recommendations for fruits or berries using a boiling water canner or pressure canner for long-term storage. However, making a refrigerator or freezer product such as jam, jelly, juice, or syrup is safe. Elderberry juice and berries can be safely stored in the freezer and thawed for processing and consumption. Thawed products

can be stored in the fridge for a short period of time, depending on the product. Contact your local extension office for more information about elderberries and food safety.

When she's not working on this magazine, **Abby Perry** enjoys making elderberry (or boxelder, see page 19) syrup with her family. A UW Extension educator serving southeast Wyoming, she can be contacted at ajacks12@uwyo.edu or (307) 328-2642.

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