

Respect your Elderberries

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Are you ready for another edible landscape shrub to think about putting in your backyard or windbreak? Well, today we will be talking about Elderberries. These native shrubs are making a huge comeback as more people search out to put more native plants into their landscapes and provide edible food sources for themselves and wildlife. Well, Elderberries are a mutli-purpose fruit that can be used to eat and also has some medicinal properties to it as well. I didn't know about the medicinal properties myself until I had a bad cough this past winter and when I went to get some syrup to calm my cough; I was surprised to find that my cough syrup had Elderberry extract in it. Talk about learning something new every day, especially in the cough medicine aisle of the local pharmacy.

Flowering in late June, after the threat of late spring frost has come and gone, Elderberry is an attractive plant that is easy to grow in well-drained soil and do not tolerate poorly drained areas. Since they flower so late, their flower and fruit develop on the current season's growth where compared to other shrubs that flower and produce fruit on last year's growth. They tolerate a wide variety of soils from sandy to clay, but be careful about putting them in sandy sites because like most shrubs they are shallow rooted so in years where we have droughts the roots can burn up and kill the plant unless they are well watered, especially during the first few years after planting has been done in the spring.

Due to their shallow roots, you will need to work on weed control. Rototilling around the shrubs is a not advised due to the shallow roots so to keep weeds down it is best to pull the weeds by hand and also doing some mowing to keep the weeds down. Mulching with tree bark is an option. Once they are established and starting to hedge out, weed control is not a problem and the Elderberries can take care of themselves.

When it comes to adding fertilizer, the best method is to take soil samples and figure out what is missing in the soil. With Elderberry being a native plant, it shouldn't need fertilizer, but sandy soils may need some organic material added to the soil before planting and then again after planting.

Pruning for Elderberry production should take place while the shrub is dormant. When pruning, cut back to the ground all dead, broken, or weak limbs; once you have done that you will remove all limbs that are more than four years old to bring back new growth when the growing season starts back up again. Remember to disinfect your pruning equipment with a cleaning solution as you go from one shrub to the next so not to spread any diseases.

Harvesting the fruit depends on the growing season and growing conditions but regularly starts in August and goes through early September. When the berries are ripe, the entire fruit cluster needs to be removed and the berries separated from the cluster. Use the fruit as soon as you can and if that is not possible then keep them in a cool temperature for later use.

The most common product from Elderberry is wine, but they can be made into jellies, jams, syrups, and pastries such as pies and cobblers. They are rarely eaten right off the shrub due to the tartness of the fruit.

Here is a recipe for Elderberry Jelly:

4 1/2 c. sugar

1 box fruit pectin

Juice of 1 lemon

3 pounds of elderberries

Heat the berries over a low fire until the juice starts to flow and then simmer the fruit for 15 minutes.

Strain the liquid through a double layer of cheesecloth (easier if you cook the fruit in the evening and let it drain overnight). Mix the elderberry and lemon juices along with just enough water to make three cups of fluid. Add the pectin, bring the mixture to a boil and stir in the sugar. Bring the jelly to a full boil again for one minute, pour it into sterilized glasses and cover the jars with paraffin.



Elderberry Shrub. Photo From www.pinelandsnursery.com



Elderberry Shrub. Photo from www.normsfarms.com