



# TINDERBOX

SPIRITUAL BEINGS BEING HUMAN

YULE - 21 JUNE 2020

ISSUE No. 122

## Elderberry our magical plant ally

### Traditional uses of elder

HUMANS HAVE used elder for medicinal purposes since early times and the tree was called 'the medicine chest of the country people' in European traditional medicine, which indicated its broad range of therapeutic uses.

Since the time of Hippocrates, it has been an integral part of household medicine and was also included in official pharmacopoeias.

Throughout history, the elderberry tree has provided a wealth of romantic folklore and superstition.

The tree was a good charm that was associated with magic and spirits were said to reside in it; people would doff their caps at the tree and refuse to burn it.

It was a grave offence to damage any part of the tree in rural England because it was inhabited by the Elder mother and intrinsically linked to mother earth.

The hollowed stems provided the panpipes and flutes used by the ancient Greeks and still used today.

Native Americans also used the branches of Black Elderberry to make flutes, so it is sometimes called 'the tree of music'.

The fresh leaves were crushed to repel insects and vermin and the berries, roots and bark provided a range of dye colours; green, blues, violets and black for dyeing cloth.

The flowers and berries were an important food source and made into pies, preserves, jams and drinks including the well-known elderberry wine.

Today the berries are still used to make an excellent homemade wine and winter cordial, which improves with age and taken hot with honey just before going to bed as an old-fashioned and well established relief for a cold.

### The magical elixir of our ancestors

Elderberry syrup was a classic, delicious home remedy that was used for hundreds of years and can still be of great service to help overcome colds and flus.

Liqueurs were originally developed as a way of preserving and extracting the medicinal properties of herbs.

They were made from medicinal fruits, herbs, and spices and made more palatable by sweetening them, usually with honey.

Sambuca is a well-known elderberry liquor that originated in Italy in the late 1800s (it also contains anise).

It is served as a digestive, typically with 3 coffee beans floating in it and called 'Sambuca con la mosca' (Sambuca with the fly), signifying 'health, happiness and prosperity'.

The juice from elderberries used to be distilled and mixed with vinegar for salad dressings and flavouring sauces.

Vinegars were frequently made aromatic by steeping them in myriad scented flowers or plants.

A large fungus that often grows on the elder was known as Judas' Ear (*Auricularia auricula-judae*) has also been used for complaints such as sore throats, sore eyes and jaundice. The fungus is still widely used in Chinese cuisine and medicine.

### The different plant parts and toxicity

Historically all parts of the plant were used medicinally, including the leaves, bark, pith, roots and young shoots, which were strong emetics and purgatives.

However, modern herbalism mostly espouses the use of the flow-



ers and berries, as other parts can be quite toxic and nauseating for some people when used without proper knowledge.

Even the berries can be a little toxic if they are not cooked and should not be used raw.

It is also important that when using the berries that only the fully ripe berries are used, as the unripe (green) berries can be mildly toxic.

The bark and leaves however can be used externally in a soothing wash or ointment for mild burns, rashes, bruises, chilblains and skin ailments.

Inclusion of the elderflowers would make such a salve more efficacious.

The white flowers are picked in full bloom during mid summer and dried in the shade (below 30 degrees Celsius) as rapidly as possible in order to prevent them turning black. Correctly dried, they turn a brownish yellow.

Bad press by adversarial medical activists in the early 20th Century spread the incorrect rumour that elder or *Sambucus* is a poisonous plant and many sources conservatively

declare the bark and leaves as poisonous.

Like all plants when used appropriately and specifically as early herbalists have championed, elder can still provide valid help in the midst of a viral pandemic, where so far no allopathic medicine has found a cure.

Master herbalist Stephen Harrod Buhner advocates using the boiled elder leaf and bark as exceptionally potent medicines for a variety of things, including viral pathogens.

He describes how when the elder leaf and bark are boiled the compounds that could cause vomiting are deactivated.

### A veritable medicine chest of a plant

The berries ripen and become ready to harvest from late summer, at the right time to help the body adapt to the approaching cooler weather and the viral illnesses this can bring.

The elderflowers and berries are Europe's most esteemed remedy for

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# Ancient berry a resilience and vitality boost

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colds, flus and upper respiratory tract infections.

The juice from this anti-viral berry is rich in bioflavonoids and vitamins A, B, C, iron and potassium. These minerals and vitamins can strengthen the general constitution overall, making it a superb winter tonic for those who succumb frequently to the colds and flus.

Both the flowers and the berries are powerful diaphoretics whereby they induce sweating, which is the body's way to reduce fevers.

They are most helpful in febrile conditions such as measles, scarlet fever and treating colds and flu, especially combined with peppermint and yarrow.

An infusion of the flowers is used for treating sinusitis, chronic nasal and bronchial catarrh, bronchitis, rheumatism and gout, while elderberry is anti-rheumatic and used to assist with sciatic pain, neuralgia or nerve pain and chronic fatigue syndrome.

Gargles made from the flowers ease sore and irritated throats or gum inflammation.

The flowers have also been used for many conditions of the genitourinary tract such as cystitis and renal stones.

Generally, because of elderflowers' flavonoid and potassium content, they may be indicated in situations where diuresis is required.

Infused elderflowers also possess many cosmetic benefits and provide a mild astringent and toning lotion for the skin to improve skin tone and function, so do include them in skincare.

The berries are considered to be a safe laxative that provides ample fibre, relieves gas and improves gastrointestinal health.

Liquid extracts made from the berries can be used in cleansing diets, juice fasts and detoxification protocols.

Botanical vitamin C and bioflavonoids such as rutin that are abundant in elderberry are essential for strengthening capillaries and veins.

Elderberry has been shown as effective in reducing the occurrence of atherosclerosis and other cardiovascular illnesses.

There is also a high amount of potassium in elderberries that lowers blood pressure and works to relax the tension of blood vessels and arteries that could lead to a heart attack.

Elderberries are also rich in essential fatty acids (EFAs are not manufactured in the body) that help strengthen the heart and contribute

**Name:** Elderberry, elder berry

**Botanical name:** *Sambucus nigra*

**Family:** Adoxaceae

**Parts used:** Flowers, berries, (the leaves and bark are used only externally)

**The Plant:** The elder *Sambucus* is a deciduous shrub or small tree that can grow up to 10 metres in height. It is native to Europe and northern Africa though introduced elsewhere because of the tree's many

uses; it grows in virtually every temperate region on earth.

There are dozens of different species of *Sambucus* around the world and the North American cousin *S. Canadensis* has very similar properties to the European *Sambucus*.

The *Sambucus* tree blooms with yellow-white flowers in late spring and forms clusters of small antioxidant-rich fruit that turn from dark red to dark purple or black when they are ripe.



to healthy skin. People with diabetes have benefited from the antioxidants in elderberry because they regulate insulin and glucose levels in the pancreas.

As a natural remedy elderberry helps stabilise those who have been diagnosed with diabetes and helps prevent the full-blown disease in others.

Based on research using both the flower and the berry of elderberry for diabetes, extracts can stimulate glucose metabolism, which helps to lower blood sugar levels.

European studies have shown that the anthocyanins in elderberry are anti-carcinogenic and can inhibit, delay or in many cases help fight cancer. Hopefully more research can reveal further success in this field.

## Big immune boost

Elderberry's greatest quality is its ability to stimulate the immune system and thus serve as an excellent preventative and treatment for colds and flu.

The elder has powerful immune-enhancing properties because of its immune-modulating and antioxidant properties and is especially effective when combined with echinacea.

Chemical constituents in elderberry inhibit the early stages of infection by blocking key viral proteins responsible for attaching and penetrating our cells.

They also reduce the replication, therefore reducing the intensity and duration by 1/2 to 1/3 and also offer relief of the discomfort during minor illnesses. Elderberry is able to work at the cellular level and provide deep support for overall immune health.

Elderberries normalise and promote the important production of cytokines so that the immune system can generate a healthy inflammatory response.

Due to the bioflavonoid quercetin, elderberries help maintain the integrity of the mucous membranes of the upper respiratory system.

Elderberries are high in flavonoids called anthocyanins, which give the berries their bluish purple

colour, as well as another group called anthocyanidins.

These flavonoids have antioxidant properties and they also have been recorded to have a high oxygen radical absorption capacity (ORAC), which is the scale by which antioxidant activity is measured. They assist with the body's natural defences and cell communication.

## Modern research on elderberry

Orthodox medicine has scant remedies to combat colds and flus and at last researchers and health authorities are turning to time-honoured botanical medicines for solutions.

Traditional herbalism offers a wide range of plants to assist the body in dealing with seasonal viral infections.

Modern research is now scientifically validating what herbal traditions have embraced successfully for millennium.

Israeli researchers found that the complex sugars in elderberries support the immune system in fighting cold and flu. They developed several formulas based on these complex sugars that have been clinically shown to help ameliorate all kinds of cold and flu.

The US National Library of Medicine did a study of elderberry using chickens that had been infected with a strain of coronavirus.

The research demonstrated how elderberry was able to inhibit the coronavirus in chickens.

As a result The US National Library of Medicine recommended that elderberry be warranted for further studies on humans to treat virulent viral strains.

A recent study by a group of Chemical and Bio molecular Engineering researchers from the University of Sydney's Faculty of Engineering and IT has identified how the ripe berries of elder help with influenza.

They showed how the phytochemicals in elderberry can directly inhibit the flu virus's entry and replication in human cells and also help

strengthen a person's immune response to the virus.

They discovered that elderberry exhibits multiple modes of therapeutic action against influenza infection, reducing symptoms and severity of the virus.

Once they get into the body, the SARS-group of viruses attach to the angiotensin-converting enzyme linkages on the surface of cells.

Elderberry was seen to block viral attachment to ACE-2 linkages, which are the entry point for the viruses to infect cellular tissues.

Apart from actually preventing infection of the cells, researchers found that actives in elderberry had a considerably stronger effect in the post-infection phase, when cells had already been infected with the virus.

The study supported direct effects of elderberry extract by blocking viral glycoproteins, as well as indirect effects by an increase of certain cytokines, which are secreted by certain cells of the immune system and work together to coordinate a defence against invading pathogens.

All of which verifies what the herbalists have known throughout history: that elderberry is an efficacious therapy against influenza viruses, as well as human pathogenic bacteria.

Other actions of elder have been explored, such as oral administration of an elder extract was shown to have anti-inflammatory properties in rats (Mascolo N, et al. Phytotherapy research 1987). Lectins extracted from the elder have also demonstrated antispasmodic properties in vitro (Richter A. Folia Biol. 1973).

But really, should tests on rats qualify to validate human medicine, when their ecology is so different to our own?

It feels more salubrious to trust in the wisdom of our ancestors and the herbalists of old, who have always understood the remarkable properties of the Elderberry tree.

What have we lose, by taking an elderberry tonic to enjoy more resilience and vitality for our overall wellbeing?