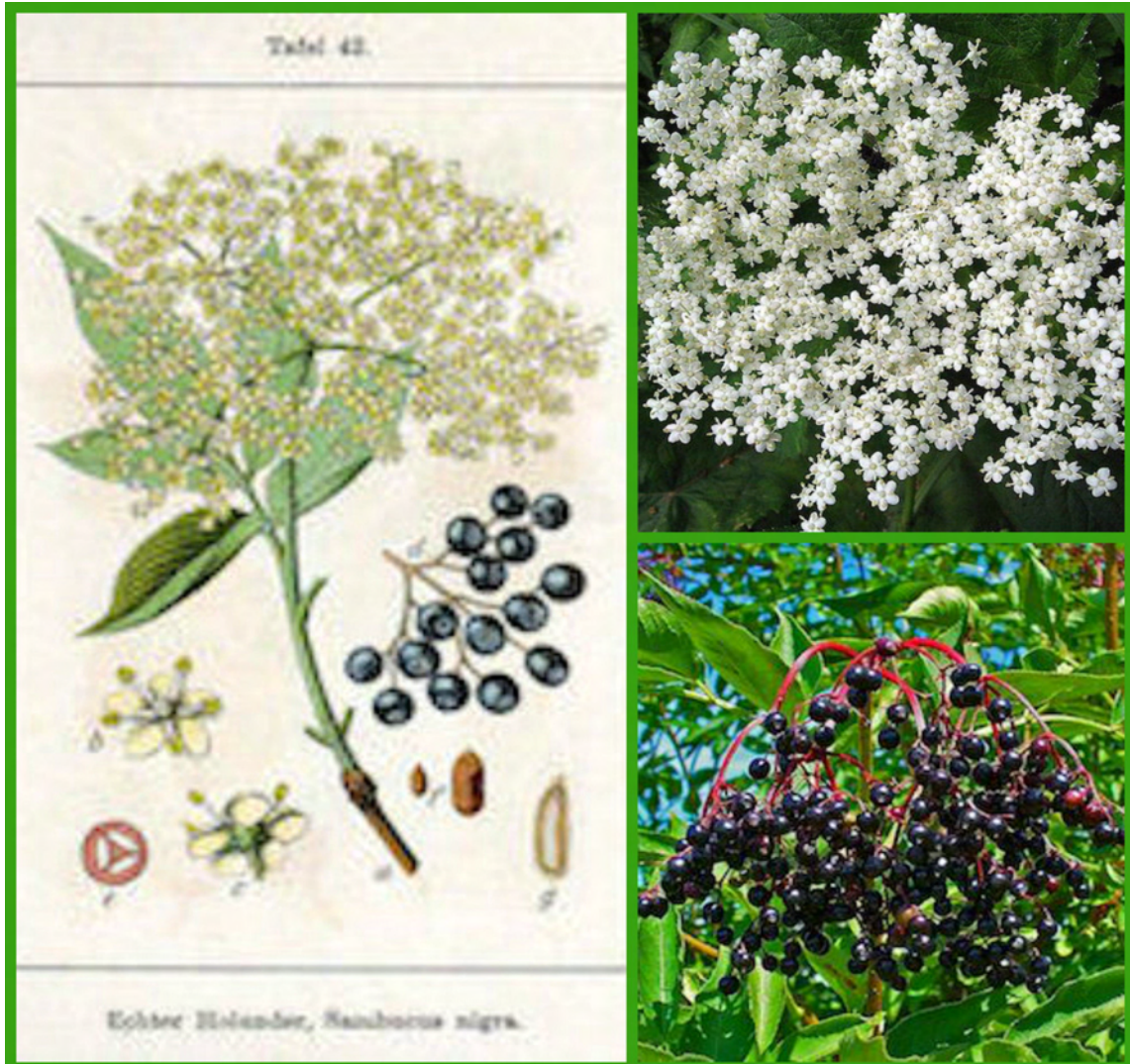


ELDER

Sambucus nigra

Trom



Elder is a native, deciduous shrub or small tree, which can grow to a height of 7-10m in hedgerows, woodland edges, wasteland, and along lanes throughout the country. It has pinnate leaves which are divided into 5-9 oval, stalked leaflets. In May it hosts heavily scented flat-topped corymbs of creamy-white 5-petalled flowers, from a distance the scent of these blooms is sweet and heady, but close up the scent intensifies to an overpowering, almost fishy aroma. This leads the flowers to be pollinated more so by flies than bees, which is similar to our other native, the hawthorn.

All the fertilized flowers become fruits, which ripen in August and September to the plants trademark juicy dark purple, almost black, berries. The drooping clusters of 5mm wide individual fruits has been used to add flavour and colour to wine, jams, sauces and chutneys, however be aware that when uncooked they can cause stomach upsets in some people.

Powerfully aromatic leaves surround the fruits and flowers of the elder, each leaf

divided into five or seven lance-like leaflets with finely toothed edges. So strong is the aroma released whenever this foliage is crushed, that it renders the plant resistant to cattle and rabbit grazing. The leaves arranged in opposite pairs, can often open as early as January, at a time when many plants are still in winter slumber.

Everything, flowers, berries and leaves are carried on branches that are almost hollow, save for a soft spongy core. Once their center is cored out, the furrowed branches and grayish warty twigs lend themselves very well to the manufacture of wind instruments such as whistles and pipes. These merry making instruments are ideal for entertaining both man and fairy alike, if legend is to be believed.

The Elderberry has a strong heritage and was referred to as 'medicine chest' by Hippocrates (400BC). References to the healing berry can be traced back to the Egyptians who had the tincture buried with them, and the Greeks who took it into battle with them to keep their army well.

The delicate white flowers can be made into a cordial. Then a few months later, use the elderberries to make into jam or a syrup. Elderberries are an old folk remedy and are rich in vitamin C, amongst other things, so they're commonly used to boost the immune system and to fight off coughs, colds and the flu.

The scented leaves of the elder were often used as a natural insect repellent, tied to a horse's mane, hung in milking parlor doorways, and rubbed on the skin and hair to keep the flies at bay.

As well as having a strong scent, large quantities of elder leaves are thought to have a mild narcotic effect. Old legends warn of sleeping under the elder, for fear you may never wake again.

Another elderberry legend claims that if a maiden washes her face in the dew of elderflowers, she will prolong or retain her youthful beauty. In fact extracts of elder are used in skin cleansers to this day.

Many people believe that elder is the tree from which Judas Iscariot hanged himself after betraying Jesus.

It has even made its way into literature: did you know the most powerful wand in Harry Potter is made of Sambucus and is known as the 'Elder Wand'?