





Elder



In Washington's Methow Valley, where I live, elder shrubs tend to quietly blend in with their surroundings for most of the year. But just after the summer equinox, the shrubs burst out of hiding. First I'll see one bloom here, then another there. Pretty soon, large white blooms dot the landscape to announce the elder plants' presence in the grandest of fashions. Then, in the fall, flowers will give way to large purple clumps of elderberries.

Both the flowers and the berries are incredible herbs for preventing and addressing upper respiratory infections like colds and especially the flu. I can't imagine going through a winter without a good supply of either of these powerful herbs. In fact, herbal preparations with elderberry have been shown to be as effective as modern antiviral drugs for the flu, but without the risk of adverse effects. This is yet another example that, despite the many advances of modern science, herbs continue to offer us powerful medicinal tools.

Other common names: black elder, European elder

Botanical name: *Sambucus nigra*, *Sambucus nigra* ssp. *cerulea*; *Sambucus nigra* ssp. *canadensis*

Family: Adoxaceae

Parts used: berries, flowers

Energetics: cooling, drying

Taste: sour (berries), bitter (flowers)

Properties (berries): antiviral, immunomodulating, antioxidant rich, inflammatory modulating

Properties (flowers): antiviral, relaxing nervine, relaxing diaphoretic, diuretic, skin protectant, antioxidant rich

Plant uses: colds and the flu, herpes, strengthening eyes, fevers, ear infections

Preparations (berries): food, syrup, tincture, tea, dye

Preparations (flowers): tea, infused oil, salve, cream, tincture, syrup

Elder has a long history of use in Europe. Archaeological excavations have unearthed large numbers of seeds at prehistoric sites, indicating that elders were consumed during the Magdalenian era (9,000 to 17,000 years ago). Excavations have also exhumed ceremonial flint spearheads that were modeled after elder leaves, giving us the insight that the elder was probably revered then as it is now.¹

Elderberry shrubs continued to be an important source of food, medicine, and material for tools for people in Europe, and many areas have stories and myths associated with the plant. One folkloric belief was that it was bad luck to cut down an elder shrub. Given that elders provide such important medicine, I can see how removing it would bring ill favor.



MEDICINAL PROPERTIES AND ENERGETICS OF ELDERBERRIES

Elderberries are powerful medicine. For more than 1,000 years, herbalists have revered elder's abilities, and mentions of the shrub are included in many important historical texts. While they are most famous for their ability to shorten the duration of the flu, they have many other uses, too.

These flavonoid-rich berries can modulate inflammation and decrease oxidative stress. Herbalists recommend elderberries to strengthen the eyes, decrease arthritic pain, and even as treatment to shorten the duration of a herpes breakout. Elderberries may also be an important herb for type 2 diabetes, but human clinical trials are needed to verify this.

Considering the long-standing traditional use of elderberries, the personal experience of many herbalists, and the positive clinical trials, more research into elderberries' effects against infections is warranted.

FOR RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS AND THE FLU

Long referred to as “the people’s medicine chest,” elderberries have a strong history of use against upper respiratory infections. In fact, one study found that elderberry has specific immunomodulating constituents that aid in treating respiratory illnesses.²

An herbal preparation of elderberry extract was shown to be effective against a number of influenza viruses in both human clinical trials and in vitro studies.³ In one placebo-controlled, double-blind study, 93.3 percent of those taking the elderberry preparation saw a significant improvement in symptoms within two days; by comparison, it took six days for 91.7 percent of those taking the placebo to see improvement.⁴ These results were so outstanding that it propelled elderberry syrup into one of the most popular herbal remedies for the flu.

Another clinical study has further validated those results. In this randomized,

double-blind, placebo-controlled study in Norway, researchers gave 60 patients who had been suffering from influenza-like symptoms for less than 48 hours either 15 mL of elderberry syrup or a placebo four times per day. On average, those receiving the elderberry syrup reported that their symptoms were relieved four days earlier than those taking the placebo. As an additional benefit, those taking the elderberry syrup reported using significantly less over-the-counter medications to relieve their symptoms.⁵

In vitro studies have shown elderberry to be effective against many different strains of the influenza virus as well as human pathogenic bacteria.⁶ This is particularly important, as bacterial infection during an influenza infection can lead to severe pneumonia. During the H1N1 scare of 2009, in vitro studies of elderberries were found to be effective against the virus. Researchers further discovered that it was the flavonoid content of the berries that can block a virus from entering a host cell.⁷

MEDICINAL PROPERTIES AND ENERGETICS OF ELDERFLOWERS

In the past, elderflowers were more commonly used externally for problems with the skin. They can be used as a tea wash or infused in oil for a cream or salve. They are said to soften and rejuvenate the skin, and elderflower water used to be a very common toiletry for women. In vitro studies have shown that elderflowers are useful additions to cosmetic formulations because they “fulfill the official requirements for sunscreen products due to their broad spectrum of UV protection combined with their high photostability and remarkable antioxidant properties”.⁸

While elderflowers are also used for upper respiratory infections, they are used differently than elderberries. Judging from my own experience as well as the reports of countless herbalists, the flowers (like the berries) undoubtedly have some immunomodulating or antiviral activity that can help to shorten a cold or flu. Elderflowers, like elderberries, have also been used to support eye health. Further, in vitro studies have confirmed that the potent anti-inflammatory ability of elderflower extract is particularly effective against periodontitis.⁹

FOR FEVERS

Until very recently, fevers were feared by most folks, and the best defense was believed to be an immediate reduction in the fever using over-the-counter medications like acetaminophen. However, we now know that fevers are an important and beneficial immune system response. By immediately decreasing a fever, we are essentially cutting off the legs of our immune system!

Elderflowers are often used to support a healthy fever process. As we saw in the Pungent section, some spicy herbs can aid

a person’s ability to warm up. These are used during the stage of fever when someone feels chilled and is shivering. Later in the fever process the patient may feel restless and hot but not have any sweating. This is when elderflowers are used.

Elderflowers let the heat out of the body by dilating the capillaries close to the skin. Herbalist jim mcdonald likens this to opening the window in a hot and stuffy room. While using elderflowers doesn’t artificially lower a fever, it can bring relief during this hot and restless phase.

HOW TO USE ELDER

Elderberries and elderflowers can be bought commercially, and both work well when dried.

When using them for acute conditions like the flu or a fever, it is better to take smaller dosages frequently, rather than larger dosages a couple of times per day.

My favorite preparations for elderberries are a syrup, oxymel, or decoction. Many herbalists also like making a tincture (alcohol extract) from the berries. Elderberries can be made into a variety of yummy treats including wine, jelly, or my favorite: a chocolate elder syrup that is great on pancakes.

RECOMMENDED AMOUNTS

Elderberries are a foodlike herb and can be consumed in larger quantities, as you would any other food.

The therapeutic amount for elder is as follows:

As syrup (elderberries): 1 teaspoon to 1 tablespoon every hour

As tincture (dried elderberries): 1:4, 30% alcohol, 4 to 6 mL, 4 to 8 times per day

As tincture (dried elderflowers): 1:5, 30% alcohol, 3 to 5 mL, 4 to 6 times per day

As tea (elderflowers): 15 grams, taken in small doses throughout the day

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Eating the raw seeds of the berries may cause nausea, but cooking them diminishes this effect.

I have heard from people that commercially bought elderberry powder can cause vomiting (presumably due to the seeds in the powdered product).



- 1 cup dried elderberries
(115 grams)
- 1 cup apple juice
- 9 grams licorice root
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground
black pepper
- 1 tablespoon dried thyme
(3 grams)
- 2 tablespoons dried rosemary
(5 grams)
- honey, to taste (optional)



ELDERBERRY SYRUP

For years I have used a version of this recipe as my go-to remedy for avoiding a cold or flu. It works best when you start to take it at the very onset of symptoms. You know that feeling. Maybe it starts with an itchy throat or a sudden onset of fatigue with a bit of chills—those early warning signs you are about to come down with something.

Frequent doses will also be more effective than simply taking it a couple of times per day. It's not unusual for me to take a spoonful every 30 to 60 minutes.

If you taste the mixture before adding the honey, you will probably find that this recipe is already quite sweet. However, the amount of honey you add will determine how long this will last. If you add an amount of honey equal to the amount of juice, and it will probably last for a year. Generally, I add only a little honey and then use the mixture within a few days.

Yield: approximately 2 cups

1. Place the elderberries, apple juice, licorice, black pepper, and 2 cups water into a medium saucepan. Turn the heat to high to bring the mixture to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for 20 minutes, covered.
2. Remove the pan from the heat. Add the thyme and rosemary. Stir well and let steep, covered, for 5 minutes.
3. Strain well. I like to strain the herbs through a jelly bag or cheesecloth so I can really squeeze out all the juice.
4. Add honey to taste. Store in the refrigerator until needed.

ELDERFLOWER TEA

Versions of this recipe have been passed down for centuries and are often attributed to 20th-century herbalist Juliette de Bairacli Levy, who spent time learning about herbs with the gypsies of Europe. I have repeatedly heard back from people who swear by this as their number one choice for relieving cold and flu symptoms. For best results, put the hot tea in a thermos and drink throughout the day.

Yield: roughly 2½ cups

1. Bring 3½ cups water to a boil.
2. Place all the herbs in a 1-quart jar. Cover with the just-boiled water and stir.
3. Steep, covered, for 30 minutes. Strain well.
4. Add honey, if desired, and drink warm.

½ cup dried elderflowers
(20 grams)

¼ cup dried yarrow leaves
and flowers (9 grams)

2 tablespoons dried rose hips
(15 grams)

2 tablespoons dried peppermint
(4 grams)

honey, to taste (optional)



½ cup jojoba oil

¼ cup dried elderflowers
(10 grams)

6 grams dried calendula
flowers

1 teaspoon rosemary anti-
oxidant extract

10 to 15 drops lavender
essential oil

ELDERFLOWER FACIAL SERUM

This is a luxurious recipe that can potentially protect the skin from sun damage. It's not a sunscreen, but it can protect your skin from oxidation and UVA damage. It has a soft and silky feel to it, without being oily. Use it daily in the morning and at night. To use, simply place a small amount of serum on your fingertips and rub into your face, neck, chest, and anywhere else that receives a lot of sun. You don't need to use a lot; this recipe may last two people an entire sunny season.

This serum can also be used to hydrate and rejuvenate your skin. I use jojoba oil in the recipe because I love its silky texture—but it is expensive. If you wish, you can substitute grapeseed oil, apricot kernel oil, or almond oil.

Because calendula is a light and oddly shaped herb, I recommend using a scale to accurately measure it.

Yield: just under ½ cup

1. The first step is to infuse your oil. You can do this with a double boiler or slow cooker. Take care not to let the oil get too hot and “fry” the herbal material. An ideal temperature for the oil is 100°F.
2. *Double boiler method:* Put 1 to 2 inches of water in the bottom pan of a double boiler. (Alternatively, fill a pot with 1 to 2 inches of water and place a tight-fitting bowl on top.) Place the jojoba oil, elderflowers, and calendula into the top. Heat over low until the oil is warm to the touch, then turn off the heat and cover with a lid. Repeat this warming and cooling process every hour or two for 24 to 48 hours. (However, you don't need to tend to the pot overnight—you can let it rest while you sleep!)
3. *Slow cooker method:* Place the jojoba oil, elderflowers, and calendula in a slow cooker, yogurt incubator, or other low-temperature appliance that can maintain the oil temperature at 100°F. Allow to infuse for 24 to 48 hours.



4. Strain off the herbs from the oil through several layers of cheesecloth. Add the rosemary extract and the essential oil, and stir well.
5. Put the oil into bottles with a treatment pump. You could also put it in a traditional tincture bottle with a dropper or any other small, decorative bottle that seals well.



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—JIM MCDONALD, HERBALIST AND FOUNDER OF HERBCRAFT.ORG