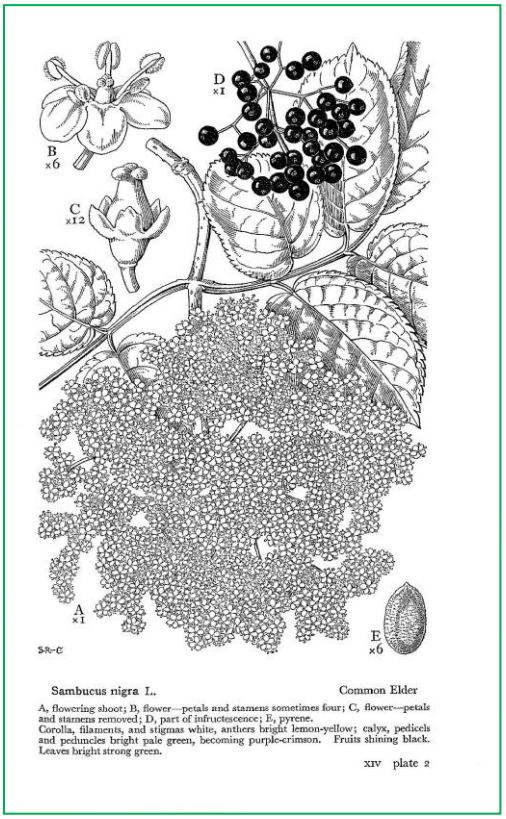
Elderberry – *Sambucus nigra*

(Honeysuckle family – Caprifoliaceae)



The elder is a shrub or small tree (2-10m) growing in hedges and woodlands. It is best recognised when in flower in June-July by its elderflowers. The black fruits ripen late August – September.

Edible uses

The blossoms can be used to make fritters by dipping them in batter and frying them. They are well-known for being turned into cordial or a slightly alcoholic drink: called elderflower champagne, because it fizzed. The berries make a delicious jam or syrup and are lovely in pancakes or pies. Don't eat raw or unripe. The leaves are poisonous.



Medicinal uses

The flowers can be used fresh or dried as a sweet tea that comforts colds and relieves dry coughs. Elder-flower water has been used as a soothing wash or skin toner. It has been used to relieve sunburn.

Syrup from the berries, which are rich in vitamin A and C reduces flue symptoms. Bark, leaves, flowers, fruits and root extracts are used to treat bronchitis, coughs, upper respiratory cold infections and fever.

Other uses

The stems of the Elder have soft pith in the centre, which can be hollowed out easily and made into whistles or blowpipes. The strong smelling foliage can be used to deter flies. The leaves, bark and root contain a chemical which releases cyanide.

In folklore it was said you should not be cut down Elder for a bonfire without a witch's permission: "Elder be ye Lady's tree, burn it not or cursed ye'll be".



Elderberry can also be used as a dye plant: berries for blue, blue-gray or violet colour, leaves for soft or deep yellow or green and the bark and root for grey or black dye.