



The lacy foliage of a purple elder

Why every garden needs an elder

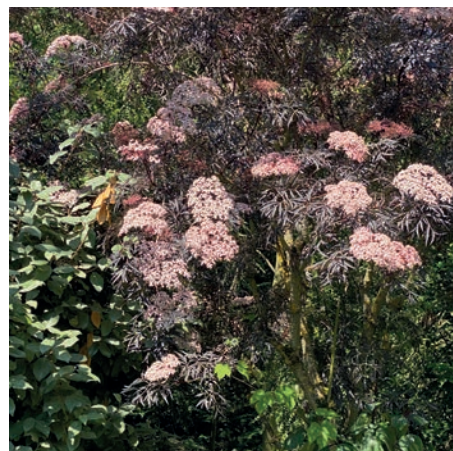
Barbara Segall sings the praises of this versatile tree

The term 'edimental' is that wondrous thing – a portmanteau word covering edible and ornamental plants. Its origin is claimed by an extraordinary gardener called Stephen Barstow, author of *Around the World in 80 Plants*. Although at the forefront of edimental growing, his is not the only voice: US garden author Rosalind Creasy's books, *The Complete Book of Edible Landscaping* published in 1982 and *Edible Landscaping* from 2010 were groundbreaking, as was UK gardener and writer Joy Larkcom in *Creative Vegetable Gardening* from 1997.

When I moved to a town garden 16

years ago, I was determined that my new garden, though small, would be ornamental and productive, and so it has been, more or less, in the ensuing years.

I am starting this mini-series with a hedgerow tree, the elder, from which you can forage flowers and fruit when they're in season, if you wish. In the garden you can enjoy the ornamental beauty of one of the much-improved forms of the elder, *Sambucus nigra*. The breeding work undertaken at East Malling in Kent was intended to combine the tough nature of the wild hedgerow plant with the foliage elegance of a maple, with its delicate cut-leaf foliage.



Sambucus nigra f. *porphyrophylla* 'Eva' is an attractive flowering small tree as well as a great plant for foragers



Above: Elder flowers and berries can be put to a range of uses, from fritters and 'champagne' to delicious jellies



A shapely purple elder

I remember planting one of the first of these improved plants, the purple, cut-leaf *Sambucus nigra* f. *porphyrophylla* 'Eva', also sold as *S. Black Lace*, which made a strong statement in the border as a shrubby tree with its shapely leaves and pink flowers in summer, followed in autumn by rich purple berries. I still grow it today, but in a container.

Purple elders grow to a height of 3 to 7m (10 to 23ft) with a spread of 3.5m (12ft). Like the hedgerow forms, they are deciduous, losing their foliage in autumn and showing off their dark stems in winter. Although the flowers and the purple or green berries are sought-after in the kitchen and for traditional remedies, they must be cooked or prepared before being ingested as they are toxic in their raw state. Don't over-harvest the flowers in summer as this will result in the plant re-blooming, which will weaken it and there will not be many berries left to harvest later in autumn.



Above: Elderberries can be cooked to make into a rich jelly



Above: Use elderflowers to make a lemon and elderflower cordial

The berries can be crushed and can be used as a dye, but be careful when using them as they will stain everything. The fruit has to be cooked if used in culinary preparations. Traditionally, the berries have been made into a cordial for colds and coughs while the flowers are used to make fritters and elderflower wine, cordial and a fizzy 'champagne'. Avoid using any red elderberries as they are not edible, even if cooked. I always leave the flowers for a while to allow any insects to crawl off before I wash them, ahead of dipping them in batter to make fritters.

Elder grows well in full sun in moist but well-drained soil. When planting, soak the plant in a bucket of water to hydrate it. Dig a hole that is large enough for the roots and keep it level with the soil. Fill the hole with a compost and garden soil mix, with an addition of bonemeal. Firm the plant in well and water during its first year at least, while it is establishing. In dry periods, elder will need regular watering, and in winter, take out any diseased, damaged or dead wood.

National Collection of Sambucus

Ed Brown, co-owner of Cotswold Garden Flowers in Worcestershire, holds the National Collection of *Sambucus*. There are 147 named elders and he has bred an additional eight.

After the drought the UK has been experiencing, and given that he grows on sandy loam, Ed is loath to recommend elder for sandy loams in a drought situation!

While walking in his fields, he realised how different the perfume of each elder is and has focused much of his breeding on achieving flowers with distinctive aromas, and with edible use in mind. 'Gate in Field', a cultivar named for the place where Ed Brown found it growing, is one that he regularly propagates. It is a vigorous plant, a hybrid of *S. nigra* subsp. *canadensis* 'Maxima' and *S. nigra* with exceptionally large flowers and an almond aroma.

'Milk Chocolate' has red to brown chocolate-coloured foliage with cream flowers that keep going until November. 'Chocolate Marzipan' has dark purple foliage with minty green undersides and its marzipan, almond-scented flowers are carried from June until August. Ed describes 'Black Cherry' as the darkest elder he has ever produced, with exceptionally dark undersides of flowers.

■ If you want to visit the National Collection the best time is midsummer. Contact Cotswold Garden Flowers, Sands Lane, Badsey, Worcestershire. Tel 01386 833849. cotswoldgardenflowers.co.uk