

Elder *Sambucus nigra*

What's in a name?

Elder originates from the Anglo-Saxon period and is derived from the old English word 'aeld' which means fire. This relates to the practise of hollowing out the straight, more mature branches, and using them as the pipe on a pair of bellows.

Botany & Ecology

This species is more a shrub than a tree and often grows quickly in a wild, unruly fashion.

The plant will throw out of several stems at the base, which initially grow straight and then curve over. At the end of the curved stem a bud forms which develops into a straight branch and then the pattern is repeated. With enough light, it can grow up to 30 feet tall.

The tree flowers May to July and is in fruit between September and October. It can live between 12-15 years and is eaten by sheep and cows, but is not liked by horses or goats.



Folklore

The Elder has long been associated with the spirit world and the Anglo Saxons believed that if you slept under the tree whilst in full blossom you would be taken into the land of the faeries and protected from evil spirits.

This spiritual connection was also common in Scandinavian culture where this spirit was called the 'Elder Mother'. It was necessary to ask the Elder Mother three times for permission to cut any part of the tree. Cutting the tree to the ground was a heinous crime and an evil witch would take on the form of the tree and avenge all those who harmed her trees.

There are many superstitions associated with planting the trees near property. The elder leaves give off an aroma known to repel flies and the plant was often grown outside livestock barns and dairies to draw the insects away. They were also traditionally planted outside a bake house as protection against the Devil and the 'hell like ovens'. The produce was left to cool under the trees again because the ash would repel insects.

Folk Medicine

Like the Dandelion (see April), all parts of this plant have been used in folk and official medicine. The bark was used in two very different ways: as a painkiller and to induce nausea.

A combination of roots and twigs were used in a series of ceremonies to cure warts. It was believed that it was necessary to cut the same number of notches into the twig or root as there were warts on the skin.

In rural areas, the root was rubbed on the warts and then buried. It was believed that the warts would drop off as the root rotted. If using a twig to rid the skin of warts, it would be necessary to burn it near the 'mother' tree so that the warts would drop and be transferred to the tree.

The bitter smell associated with the leaves has long been used as an insect repellent. When crushed and boiled, the resulting liquid was used to cure eczema in both humans and livestock. In addition, the flowers have long been made into syrups and medicines and prescribed as a cure for fevers, coughs and colds. They were also added to water, allowed to soak and then applied to alleviate sunburn. The berries have a tradition for being crushed and made into wine which in turn, was warmed and used more as a 'cure all' than as a treatment for any one illness. The concentrate could be ingested as a treatment for gout and nerve pains.

Modern day herbalists still use the plant in much the same way as their medieval counterparts. Most recently, an infusion of 'flower water' and bark has been used to reduce the discomfort caused by arthritis.