

## American Elderberry and Pollinator Update

By Susan Camp

A caller to the Gloucester Extension Office last week expressed interest in learning about how to grow American elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*). Our initial phone conversation focused on soil testing through Virginia Tech. After he receives the soil test report, we will discuss amendments, if any, that are needed to improve the health of the soil, so it will be ready for planting in the spring.

*Sambucus canadensis* is native to eastern and central North America and some parts of South America in USDA Hardiness Zones 3 to 9. It is a close relative of common or black elderberry (*S. nigra*), which is a European native. American elderberry often is listed as *S. nigra* ssp. *canadensis*.

American elderberry is a woody, deciduous shrub or small tree with a graceful, loose, arching habit. The branches reach 5 to 12 feet in height with a similar spread. Elderberry prefers moist to wet, well-drained, loamy soil with a pH of 5.5 to 6.5 in full sun to part shade. It tolerates clay soil. In the wild, elderberry often is found in old fields, bogs, and ditches.

The long branches bear large, oval, dark-green, compound leaves. Roots, stems, leaves, and unripe fruit are toxic and should not be consumed, as they cause unpleasant gastrointestinal symptoms. Broad, flat clusters of tiny, creamy-white, lemon-scented flowers bloom in May and June. The purplish-black drupes, or stone-fruit, appear in late summer. The fruit is not considered tasty when raw. Elderberries are high in Vitamin C and other nutrients and are labeled a “superfood” for their nutritional value. Elderberries are used to make jelly, syrup, wine, and liqueur. Elderflower water is drunk as a spring tonic in many Central and Eastern European countries. Elderberry fruit and twigs are used to brew natural dyes, and the stems are used in basket-making.

American elderberry produces suckers that must be pruned unless you are developing a hedge or naturalizing an area. Usually grown as a multi-trunked shrub, elderberry can be pruned to a single, central trunk. In late winter or early spring, prune out dead, damaged, and diseased stems and remove or shorten suckers to maintain size and shape. You can prune a neglected shrub to the ground to rejuvenate it. It is a native plant and is not considered invasive, but suckering must be controlled.

Insect pests include spider mites, aphids, and borers. Powdery mildew and leaf spot can infect elderberry. The shrub is winter-hardy, but high winds, ice, and heavy snow can damage stems.

Elderberry provides a nectar source for bees and butterflies. As many as 48 species of birds consume the fruit, so if you want to harvest enough to make elderberry syrup and pie filling, you will need to place netting over the bushes. Unfortunately, deer eat the stems and leaves.

*Sambucus* is an attractive plant in a wildlife or native garden or as a loose, sprawling hedge or privacy screen. Use a single shrub as a striking specimen plant.

The Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder entry “*Sambucus canadensis*”; NCState Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox entry “American Elderberry”; and the Plant Database entry of The Ladybird Johnson Wildlife Center “*Sambucus nigra* ssp. *canadensis*” provide information about this lovely native shrub.

#### An Update on Pollinators

Since my August 7, 2025 column on the worldwide decrease of pollinators, I am happy to report that many of the 32 Black Swallowtail caterpillars feeding on the herbs at that time pupated, and we now have approximately 43 Black Swallowtail caterpillars in various instars contentedly munching on the parsley and fennel. We also have many Eastern Tiger Swallowtails and Silver-Spotted Skippers. I have seen one Red-Spotted Purple this summer and no Common Buckeyes or Variegated Fritillaries. Sadly, I haven’t seen a single Monarch, either.

You can keep track of the pollinators in your garden, too. They are fascinating to watch, and with the aid of a field guide or the internet, you will soon learn the names of the most common visitors to your garden.