



Sambucus canadensis American Elder¹

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INTRODUCTION

A fast-growing deciduous shrub, American Elder suckers quite easily and is often seen as a broad, spreading, multistemmed plant with bright green, pinnately compound, 12 to 14-inch-long leaves arranged along the arching branches (Fig. 1). But it can be effectively pruned into a nice, small, single or multi-stemmed, small, flowering tree but needs regular pruning to remove suckers growing from the base of the plant. In early summer (northern part of its range) or sporadically all year long (in USDA hardiness zones 9 and 10), American Elder is literally smothered with 6 to 10-inch-wide clusters of yellowish-white blooms. These are followed by a multitude of small, dark purple berries which are quite popular with birds, and can be used in pies, jellies, or fermented to make a wine. Some reference books refer to *Sambucus simpsonii* as a separate species, but this is probably a southern extension of *Sambucus canadensis*.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Scientific name: *Sambucus canadensis*
Pronunciation: sam-BEW-kuss kan-uh-DEN-sis
Common name(s): American Elder, Common Elder
Family: *Caprifoliaceae*
USDA hardiness zones: 4 through 10 (Fig. 2)
Origin: native to North America
Uses: container or above-ground planter; near a deck or patio; reclamation plant; trainable as a standard; specimen; no proven urban tolerance
Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

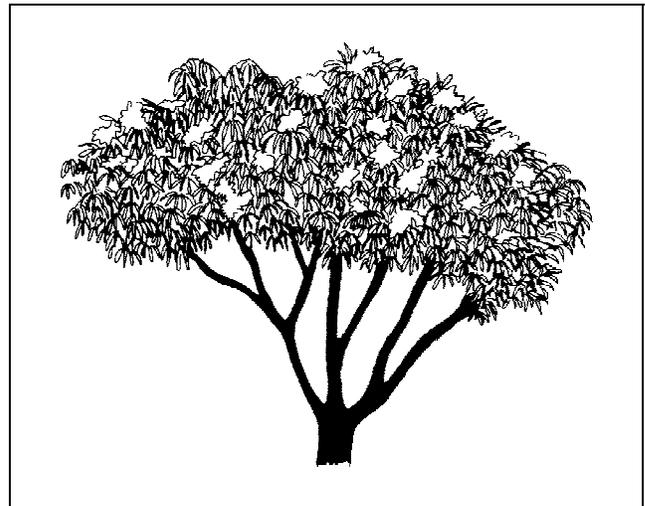


Figure 1. Mature American Elder.

DESCRIPTION

Height: 8 to 12 feet
Spread: 6 to 10 feet
Crown uniformity: irregular outline or silhouette
Crown shape: round
Crown density: open
Growth rate: medium
Texture: fine

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: opposite/subopposite
Leaf type: odd pinnately compound
Leaflet margin: serrate
Leaflet shape: elliptic (oval); lanceolate
Leaflet venation: pinnate

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Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Leaf type and persistence: deciduous
Leaflet blade length: 4 to 8 inches; 2 to 4 inches
Leaf color: green
Fall color: yellow
Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: white
Flower characteristics: showy; summer flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: round
Fruit length: < .5 inch
Fruit covering: fleshy
Fruit color: black; purple
Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; suited for human consumption; no significant litter problem; showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: bark is thin and easily damaged from mechanical impact; droop as the tree grows, and will require pruning for vehicular or pedestrian clearance beneath the canopy; routinely

grown with, or trainable to be grown with, multiple trunks; not particularly showy; no thorns
Pruning requirement: requires pruning to develop strong structure
Breakage: susceptible to breakage either at the crotch due to poor collar formation, or the wood itself is weak and tends to break
Current year twig color: gray
Current year twig thickness: thick

Culture

Light requirement: tree grows in full sun
Soil tolerances: clay; loam; sand; acidic; alkaline; extended flooding; well-drained
Drought tolerance: moderate
Aerosol salt tolerance: low
Soil salt tolerance: poor

Other

Roots: surface roots are usually not a problem
Winter interest: no special winter interest
Outstanding tree: not particularly outstanding
Invasive potential: seeds itself into the landscape
Ozone sensitivity: sensitive or moderately tolerant

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: susceptible

Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

USE AND MANAGEMENT

Ideal for use in naturalized landscapes where it will tolerate acid or alkaline soil and even some drought, American Elder performs best in full sun on moist to wet, fertile soils. Plant it in the shrub border or locate it next to the patio for a wonderful flower display. The plant is often overlooked by the trade perhaps because it is so commonly found in and along the woods, but it has a place in the garden, although its rather random habit may not make it popular in the commercial landscape. Requires pruning to create a neat small tree.

A few cultivars include: 'Acutiloba', leaflets very deeply divided, a nice fine-textured plant; 'Aurea', bright red fruit, yellow leaves; 'Adams', fruits in dense, large clusters, excellent for baking. There are a variety of other very attractive species.

Propagation is by seed or cuttings.

Pests

Borers, occasional leaf-chewing insects, may infest this tree.

Diseases

American Elder can be infected by cankers, leaf spots, powdery mildew.